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“HELD IN BONDAGE;”

OR,

GRANVILLE, DE VIGNE.

中國人民日報社 總發行所

地址：北京，前門外大街

# “HELD IN BONDAGE;”

OR

GRANVILLE DE VIGNE.

*A Tale of the Day.*

By OUIDA.

“A young man married is a man that’s marred.”—SHAKSPEARE.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

LONDON: TINSLEY, BROTHERS,

18, CATHERINE STREET, STRAND.

1863.

THE HISTORY OF THE

REIGN OF

LONDON: PRINTED BY W. CLOWES AND SONS, STAMFORD STREET, &  
AND CHARING CROSS.

( v )

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# “HELD IN BONDAGE;”

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GRANVILLE DE VIGNE.

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## CHAPTER I.

### THE GAZELLE IN THE TIGER'S FANGS.

VANE CASTLETON had gone mad about Alma. I do not mean that he loved her, as poor Curly did, well enough to marry her; nor as De Vigne, who would have thrown everything away to win her; but he was wild about her, as very heartless men, *chères demoiselles*, can be wild about a woman who has bewitched them. He was first of all fascinated by her, then he was piqued by the wish to rival De Vigne, whom he disliked for some sharp sayings thrown carelessly at him; then, he was incensed by Alma's contemptuous treatment of him; and at last he swore to go there no more, to be treated *de haut en bas* by 'that bewitching little syren,' but to win her by fraud or force.

She might hate him, he did not care for that ; he did not think, with Montaigne, that a conquest, to be of value, must be *de bonne volonté* on the part of the captured ; and if he had been in the East he would have sent his slaves, had her blindfolded, and kept her in his seraglio, without regard as to whether tears or smiles were the consequence. Not being able to act so summarily, and the House of Tiara having been, from time immemorial, as eccentric as Wharton, and as unscrupulous as the Mohawks, he hit upon a plan seemingly more fitted for bygone days than for our practical and prosaic age, where police prevent all escapades, and telegrams anticipate all *dénouements*. But the more eccentric the thing, the more pleasure was it to Castleton, who had something of the evil vanity of Sedley, and liked to set the town talking of his bad deeds, as other men like to make it gossip of their great ones ; he liked to out-Herod Herod, and his reputation for unscrupulous vice was as dear to him as though it had been the fame of the soldier or the statesman ; he loved his mere approach to damn a woman's character, *à la* Caligula, and if he could win Alma by some plot which would increase his notoriety—so much the better.

On the morrow after De Vigne's visit to her,

Alma sat waiting to catch the first faint beat of his horse's hoofs. She had done nothing that morning; her easel had lost all charm for her; Sylvo and Pauline obtained but little attention; and after she had filled the room with flowers, singing soft Italian barcarolles while she gathered them, till the goldfinches and the thrushes strained their throats to rival her, she threw herself down on the steps of the window to watch for her lover's coming, full of that feverish and impassioned joy which can scarcely credit its own existence.

When noon had passed, her restlessness grew into anxiety—she had expected him early; with a union of child-like and lover-like impatience she had risen with her friends the birds, hoping that he might surprise her at breakfast. Twenty times that morning had she run down to the gate, never heeding the soft summer rain that fell upon her hair, to look along the road. About one o'clock she stood leaning over the little wicket—a fair enough picture—a deep flush of anxiety was upon her cheeks, her eyes darkening with excitement and the thousand fluttering thoughts stirring in her heart; while, with that longing to look well in his eyes which had its spring in something far nobler than coquetry, her dress was as graceful as

her simple, but always tasteful toilette could afford. As she stood, the sound of hoofs rang upon the highway in the distance; the colour deepened in her cheeks, her whole face lighted up, her heart beat fast against the wooden bar on which she rested. She was opening the gate to meet him: but,—when the horseman came nearer to her view she saw that it was not De Vigne, but Curly; not the one for whom her heart waited, but the one whom it rejected. He threw himself off his saddle, and caught her hand:

‘Alma! for Heaven’s sake do not turn away from me.’

She drew it impatiently away: she held it as De Vigne’s—it was to be touched by no other. Poor Curly came at an unlucky hour to plead his cause!

‘Alma, is your resolution fully taken?’ he said, catching her hand once more in his too tightly for her to extricate it. ‘Listen to me but one word; I love you so well, so dearly! Can you not give me one hope? Can you not feel some pity?’

Again she drew herself away, more gently; for her first irritation had passed, and she was too compassionate a nature not to feel regret for the sorrow of which she was the cause. A look of

pain passed over her glad face as she answered him, naïvely :

‘ Why ask me ? What I told you two days ago was the truth. I thank you very much for all your kindness, but I could never have loved you.’

‘ You *would* have done, but for De Vigne.’

A brighter flush rose over her brow ; she lifted her head with a proud, eager gladness upon it ; she misunderstood him, and fancied De Vigne had told his friend of their mutual love.

‘ No, no ; if I had never known him I should have loved my ideal, of which *he* alone could have been the realization. You are mistaken ; I could never have loved any other !’

The speech had a strange combination of girlish fondness and impassioned tenderness ; it was a speech to fall chill as ice upon the heart of her listener ; he who loved her so well, and, as is so often the fate of true affection, could win not one fond word in return !

Curly’s hands grasped the rail of the gate ! his face looked aged ten years with the marks of pain upon it.

‘ He has told you, then ?’ he said, abruptly.

He meant of De Vigne’s marriage, she thought he meant of De Vigne’s love, and answered with a deep blush over her face :

‘Yes!’

‘My God! and you stoop to listen to his love?’

‘Stoop? it is he who stoops to me!’

She gloried in her love, and would no more have thought of evading acknowledgment of it than Chelonis or Eponina of evading exile or death.

‘Heaven help me, then—and you!’

The two last words were too low for her to hear; but, touched by the suffering on his face, she stretched out the hand she had withdrawn.

‘Indeed I am grieved myself to grieve you! Forget me; or, until you do, at least forgive me!’

‘Forgive you!’ repeated Curly, ‘what would I not! but forget you—never! Oh, my love, my darling!’ he cried, clasping her hands close up to his heart, ‘would to God you would listen to me. I would make you so happy: you will never be so with De Vigne. He loves you selfishly; he will sacrifice you to himself; and I,—all that life can give shall be yours,—my name, my home, my rank,—and with time I will make you love me—’

At first she had listened to him in vague stupefaction; when she did comprehend his meaning

she wrenched her hands away for the last time, her eyes flashing with anger, passion of another sort crimsoning her brow.

‘Do you dare to insult me with such words? Do you venture to suppose that any living man could ever make me faithless to *him*? You are a true friend indeed to come and slander him in his absence! *He* would have scorned to take such mean advantage over *you*!’

With those vehement words, natural in her, but how bitter to him! Alma swept from him. His hands grasped the gate-bar till the rusty nails in the wood forced themselves through his gloves into the flesh, and watched her till the last gleam of her golden hair had vanished from his sight. Then he threw himself across his saddle, and galloped down the road, the ring of the hoofs growing fainter on Alma’s ear as she listened for those that should grow nearer and nearer till they should bring De Vigne to her side. She had no thought for Curly, and no pity; I think she would have had more if she had known that never again on earth would she look upon that fair, fond face, which would so soon lie turned upwards to the pitiless sky, unconscious and calm amidst the roar of musketry and the glare of a captured citadel.

She threw herself down upon a couch, excited still with the glow of indignation that Curly's words had roused in her. Impetuous always, she was like a little lioness at any imputation on De Vigne: whether he had been right or wrong, she would have flung herself headlong into his defence; and, had she seen any faults in her idol, she would have died before she let another breathe them. Scarcely had the gallop of Curly's horse ceased to mingle with the fall of the rain-drops and the rustle of the chesnut-leaves, when the roll of carriage wheels broke on her ear. She started up—this time she felt sure it was he—and even Pauline screamed the name she had caught from Alma, ‘Sir Folko! Sir Folko!’

But the girl's joyous heart fell when she saw a hired brougham standing at her gate, for she knew that if De Vigne ever drove down, he drove in one of his mail-phætons, with his grooms. Out of the brougham came a lady, tall, stately, superbly dressed, gathering her rich skirts round with one hand as she came up the gravel path. Alma watched her with irritation and no sort of interest; she did not know her, and she supposed she was some stranger called to look at her pictures—since her *Louis Dix-sept* had been exhibited at the *Water-Colours* she had had many such visitors.

The lady turned, of course, to the side of the house to approach the hall door, and Alma lay quiet on her couch stroking Pauline's scarlet crest, while the bird reiterated its cry, 'Sir Folko! Sir Folko!'

She rose and bowed as her visitor entered, and looked at her steadily, with a trick Alma had of studying every new physiognomy that came before her, forming her likes and dislikes thereon; rapidly, indeed, but often unerringly. The present survey displeased her, as her guest slightly bent her stately head. They were a strange contrast! The woman tall, her figure very full, too full for beauty; artistic rouge upon her cheeks, and tinting round her superb black eyes; her attire splendid, her jewels glittering, yet with some indefinable want of the *lady* upon her: the girl small, slight, and simply dressed, with native grace and aristocracy in all her movements, and her air of mingled child-likeness, intelligence, and brilliance.

Alma rolled a chair towards her, and looked a mute inquiry as to her visitor's errand. Her guest's eyes were fixed upon her in curious scrutiny; she seemed a woman of the world, yet appeared at a loss how to explain her call, and played with the fringe of her parasol as she said, 'Have I the pleasure of seeing Miss Tressillian?'

Alma bent her head.

She toyed uneasily with the long fringe as she went on, never relaxing her gaze at Alma :

‘ May I inquire, too, whether you are acquainted with Major De Vigne ? ’

At the abrupt mention of his name, a hot blush came in Alma’s face ; again she bowed in silence.

‘ You are very intimate with him—much interested in him, are you not ? ’

Alma rose, her slight figure haughtily erect, her eyes sufficiently indicative of resentment at her visitor’s unceremonious intrusion :

‘ Pardon me, madam, if *I* inquire by what title you venture to intrude such questions upon me ? ’

‘ My title is clear enough,’ answered her guest, with a certain sardonic smile, which did not escape Alma’s quick perception, and increased her distrust of her interrogator. ‘ Perhaps you may guess it when I ask you but one more question : Are you aware that Major de Vigne is a married man ? ’

For a moment the cruel abruptness of the question sent back the blood to the girl’s heart, and her companion’s bold, harsh eyes watched with infinite amusement the quiver that passed over her bright young face. But it was only for a moment : the next, Alma smiled at the idea, as if Sir Folko would conceal anything from her—above all, con-

ceal *that!* Her rapid instincts made her mistrust and dislike this woman; she imagined it was some one who, having a grudge against De Vigne, tried this method to injure him, and her clear, fearless eyes flashed contemptuous anger on her questioner; she deigned no answer to the inquiry.

‘Major De Vigne is my *friend*. I allow no stranger to mention his name to me except with the respect it deserves. I am quite at a loss to conceive why you should trouble yourself to insult me with these unwarranted interrogations. You will excuse me if I say that I am much engaged just now, and should be glad to be left alone.’

She bowed as she spoke, and moved across the room to the bell, but her visitor would not take the hint, however unmistakable; she sat still, leaning back in her chair playing with her parasol, probably puzzled whether or no the Little-Tressillian was aware of her lover’s marriage. High-couraged and thoroughly ‘game’ as Alma was, she felt repugnance to this woman—a certain vague fear of, and dislike to being alone with, her.

Her visitor rose too, and took a different tone, fixing her black eyes, in whose bold stare spoke a dark past, and an unscrupulous character, on those which were clear with innocence and youth.

‘You take too high a tone, young girl; if you do *not* know of his marriage, you are to be pitied; if you do, you are to be blamed indeed; and if you have any shame in you, you will never, out of regard for yourself and justice to me, see Granville de Vigne again, when I tell you that—I am his wife!’

‘*His wife!*’ With ashy lips Alma re-echoed the words, ‘*his wife!*’ that coarse, cruel-eyed woman, with her bold stare, and her gorgeous dress, which yet could not give her the stamp of Birth; for Time had not passed wholly lightly on the Trefusis, and now there was more trace of the Frestonhills milliner in her than of the varnish she had adopted from the Parisiennes, for at thirty-seven the Trefusis had grown—vulgar! That woman his wife! Alma, true to her faith in, and reverence of, De Vigne, could have laughed at the mere thought! That woman his wife!—his! when but a few hours before he had called *her* his own, and kissed her, when she spoke to him of their sweet future together! She knew it was a plot against him; she would not join in it by lending ear to it. *He* could never have loved that woman—with her rouged cheeks, her tinted eyelids, her cruel eyes, her cold, harsh voice. Alma did not remember that a man’s first love is invariably the reverse of his last!

‘You his wife!’ she repeated, with a contempt which excited the savage nature of her listener, as the Trefusis had excited the slumbering fire of Alma’s character. ‘You *his* wife? Before pretending to such a title, you should first have learnt the semblance of a lady to uphold you in the assumption of your rôle! Your impertinence in addressing me I shall not honour by resenting; but your ill-done plot, I must tell you, will scarcely pass current with me.’

She spoke haughtily and impatiently, anger and disdain flashing from her expressive face, which never cared to attempt concealment of any thought passing through her mind.

‘Plot!’ repeated the Trefusis, with a snarl on her lips like a hound catching hold of its prey. ‘You think it a plot, young lady? or do you only say so to brazen it out before a woman you have foully wronged? If it *be* a plot, what say you then to that?’

Not letting go her hold upon it, she held before Alma’s eyes the certificate of her marriage.

‘Read it!’

Alma, who had never seen a document of the kind, saw only a printed paper, and put it aside with a haughty gesture; she would have none of this woman’s enforced confidences! But the Tre-

fusis caught her little delicate wrist and held the certificate so that Alma could not choose but see the names with that prolix preamble by which his Grace of Canterbury so graciously permits an Englishman to wed.

*Then* Alma's face grew white, even to her lips; for an instant her heart stopped with a dull anguish of horror, but, true to her allegiance, refused, even in the face of proof, the doubt that would dishonour him; no thought that was treachery to her lover should dwell in her mind, no stranger should whisper of him in his absence to her! She threw off the Trefusis's hand as though it had been the gripe of an adder's fangs, her soft eyes flashing like dark blue steel.

‘Leave my presence! Leave it! It is useless to seek to injure him with me.’

As she spoke she rang the bell, and the single servant of the house responded to the summons; Alma bowed her head with the stately grace of an Empress signing to her Household, ‘Show this lady to the door.’

For once in her life the Trefusis was baffled; she knew not how to play her next card, uncertain whether Alma was aware or unaware of her marriage to De Vigne. She had hoped to find a weak and timorous young girl, whom her dignity would

awe and her story overwhelm, but she was cheated of her second revenge. Mortified and incensed she swung round, with her devil's sneer upon her fine bold features :

‘Excuse me, Miss Tressillian, for my very misplaced pity ! I fancied you a young and orphaned girl, whom knowledge of the truth might warn from an evil course ; I regret to find one on whom all warnings are thrown away, and who gives insult where she should ask for pardon. No other motive than pity for you prompted my call. I have been too often the victim of Major de Vigne’s inconstancy, for it to have any longer power to wound me.’

Then the woman, whom Church and Law termed his Wife, swept from the room, and the girl was left once more to her solitude. *In* that solitude the high-strung nerves gave way ; while her sword and her shield were wanted she had done battle for him gallantly ; but now that they were no longer needed her courage forsook her, and she lay on the couch sobbing bitterly. Tears had always been very rare with her, but of late they had found their way much oftener to the eyes which should have been as shadowless as the Southern skies, whose hue they took ; with passion, all other floodgates of the heart are loosed. Her wild rapture had its

reaction ; vehement joys ever pay their own price ! She did not credit what the Trefusis had told her ; her own quick perception, true in its *deduction*, though here not true in fact, knew that no really injured wife would have taken the tone of her visitor, nor such means of making her wrongs and her title known ; there was something moreover false, coarse, cruel, which struck at once on her delicate senses ; she felt sure it was some slander, and the certificate a forgery ; she had read of women who had taken similar revenge upon men. ‘ So many must have loved him,’ thought Alma, ‘ and so many, therefore, will hate me as I should hate any who took him from me.’ So she reasoned with that loyal love which, truer than the love that is fabled as *blind*, will, if it see a stain on its idol, veil it from all eyes, even from its own. Still it had left upon her a sort of vague dull weight ; she felt afraid, she scarcely knew of what, a terror lest her new-won joys should leave her as suddenly as they had come to her : she would have given years of her young life to look in his eyes again, and hear his voice.

Once more the roll of carriage-wheels interrupted the ceaseless fall of the heavy rain. Alma started up ; dashing the tears from her flushed cheeks. She had suffered a good deal in her brief

life, but she had never known anything like the terror which, crowding the pain of hours into a single minute, laid its leaden hand upon her when she saw not De Vigne but his servant Raymond alone approach.

‘Oh my God! what has happened? He is ill!’ she uttered, unconsciously: her nerves were unstrung by her interview with the Trefusis, and her imagination seized on all the evil that could have befallen him whom she loved so well.

She stood with her hands clenched in the effort to repress the emotion she could not show to a servant, and as Raymond approached her, with the silken suavity which characterized that prize valet, he seemed, for once, to be hurried and anxious.

‘Madam,’ he began, with one of the reverential salaams which would have qualified him to be groom of the chamber, ‘in riding home last evening, Major De Vigne was thrown from his horse.’

‘Good God! . . . is he hurt?’

No presence could restrain the agony spoken in those few brief words.

‘Yes—much, madam,’ said Raymond, hesitatingly. ‘The hurt might not perhaps be so severe, but inflammation, and consequently fever, have set in. He is at times unconscious, and at those times

he is constantly speaking of you, Miss Tressillian; muttering your name, and calling you to come to him so incessantly, that the surgeon told me, if I knew who the lady was that the Major meant, to fetch her, for that his life depended on his being kept as calm as possible. So, madam, I ventured to come and inform you. I could not tell what to do. I hope I have done right? I brought the carriage in case you might be kind enough to come—’

All the light died out of the face so radiant but a short time before! She was white as a corpse, save for the blue veins which stood out upon her temples and her hands. She gave one low, deep sob, tears would not come to her relief; and her throat was hoarse and dry as after a long illness, when she answered:

‘Right—quite right. I shall be ready in a moment.’

Alma’s love was infinitely too true, eager, and active, to stand still and weep. She never paused to reason or reflect; all she thought of was De Vigne in suffering, perhaps in danger. *He* wanted her—that was enough! She ran upstairs, her heart suffocated with the sobs to which she would not give way while he needed nerve and action to aid him—took her hat, threw a large cloak over

her dress, and was beside the carriage in an instant.

‘The Major was riding towards Windsor, madam, so he is now at the nearest house to the place where he was thrown. It is many miles from here,’ said Raymond, as he opened the door.

Alma bent her head; her thoughts were too full to notice that the man had said on his entrance that his master was riding home, now that he had been going across to Windsor; or to remark the improbability of De Vigne’s having gone so far the previous night. The door was shut, Raymond got upon the box, and the brougham rolled away, bearing them from St. Crucis.

The drive was through the heavy rain, which fell without cessation. She could not remember how far Windsor was from Richmond; she knew little or nothing of London or its environs, indeed of England itself, so secluded had her life been since she quitted Lorave; but the way seemed interminable. So horrible grew the long dreary drive, through roads so strange to her, in her fear and anxiety, with the ceaseless sigh and sob of the drenching rain, that Alma, impressionable as most enthusiastic natures are, became nervous and fearful, and excited to a vague and heavy dread of some approaching evil. All her radiant joy of the morn-

ing had died away. That dreary, solitary drive! how long it seemed; how horrible the grey, dark storm, the ceaseless roll of the wheels, the wearisome, unfamiliar road! Alma, as if conscious of her doom, cowered down in a corner of the carriage, like a young child fearful of the dark, looking back on the sweet past of yesterday, as beside the grave of one they have loved, men look back on the time when the dead lips were smiling, and the closed eyes were bright.

The carriage stopped at last on the outskirts of Windsor, rolled through iron scroll-gates under some dripping larch-trees, through small grounds very ill kept, with long grass and flowers run wild, and a statue or two, moss-grown, grim, and broken: the very aspect of the place struck a fresh chill into her heart, and nothing in the house itself reassured her. It was a cross between an old country-house and a lorette's villa, and had an untidy, dissipated, unpleasant look about it to one long used to the brilliant sunlight of Lorave. It seemed a house that might have seen dark stories and painful scenes, smothered from the light of justice, between those irregular and dirty walls. The carriage stopped again before a low side-door, and Alma now thought little of the house—only of the one who had sought its temporary

asylum. She sprang from the brougham the instant Raymond let down the steps.

‘Where is your master?’

‘I will take you to him, madam, if you will have the kindness to follow me,’ said that silky valet.

Alma bent her head in acquiescence, and followed him through several crooked passages and tortuous corridors, through which she could not have found her way back unaided; at last he throw open the door of a room, and stood aside for her to enter. It was now nearly nine o’clock; the dense clouds and drenching rain had made it as dark in the open country as though it were fully night; and in this chamber, of which the curtains before the windows at the far end were drawn, Alma could see nothing save the indistinct outline of a table and some chairs near her. She turned hastily to Raymond:

‘Is Major de Vigne—’

But the valet had withdrawn, closing the door behind her, and she heard a sharp click like the turning of a key in a lock. Then—a deadly agony of fear came upon her, and she trembled from head to foot; horrid sights, sounds, thoughts, seemed to hover round her; she had had from infancy a strange terror of being alone in dark-

ness, and she stretched out her hand with a pitiful cry :

‘Sir Folko—Granville—where are you?’

In answer to her call a man’s form drew near, indistinct in the gloom, and in her ear a voice whispered :

‘My beautiful, my idolized Alma! there is one here who loves you dearer than him you call. If I have erred in bringing you hither, pardon at least a fault of too much love!’ . . . .

A shriek of loathing, despair, horror, and anguish burst from Alma’s lips, ringing shrill and loud through the darkened room,—she knew that the speaker was Castleton! She struggled from his grasp, and mastering her terror with the courage which was planted side by side in her nature with so much that was poetic and susceptible, she turned on him haughtily :

‘Lord Vane, what do you think to gain by daring to insult me thus? Major de Vigne’s servant brought me here to see his master, who was dangerously hurt. I desire you to leave me, or, if this *be* your house, and you have one trace of a gentleman’s honour left in you, to tell me at once where I may find my friend?’

Castleton could have laughed outright at the little fool’s simplicity, but he was willing to win

her by gentle means if he could, perhaps, for there are few men entirely blunted and inured to shame; he scarcely relished the fiery scorn of the eyes that flashed upon him in the twilight.

‘Do not be so severe upon me,’ he said, softly. ‘Surely one so gentle to all others may pardon an offence born from a passion to which she of all others should show some pity? I would have told you yesterday how madly I love you—and my love is no cold English fancy, Alma!—I love you, my divine little angel; and my idolatry has driven me perhaps to error, but an error such as women should surely pardon.’

‘Off! do not touch me!’ cried Alma, fiercely, as his hand wandered towards the delicate form that he could crush in his grasp as a tiger’s fangs a young gazelle. ‘Your words are shame, your love pollution, your presence hateful! Insult me no more, but answer me, yes or no, where is Major de Vigne?’

‘De Vigne? The devil knows! He is with his wife, I dare say; he can’t hear you, and would not help you if he did.’

‘It is a lie!’ moaned Alma, almost delirious with fear and passion. ‘He has no wife; and he will revenge me all your dastard insults!’ . . . .

‘How will he hear of them, pretty one?’ laughed

Castleton, seizing her in his arms, while his hot breath sullied her cheeks. ‘Do you think, now I have you, I shall let you go again? I have hardly caged my bird only to let her fly! We shall clip your wings, loveliest, till you like your captivity too well to try and free yourself. You are mine now, Alma—who can save you?’

‘I shall never be yours—dastard!—coward!’ gasped she, striking him a fierce blow with her clenched hands upon his eyes, in her agony, as she struggled in the iron grasp of his embrace, maddened by the loathsome kisses he branded on her lips—the abhorred caresses that seemed to pollute her with infamy and shame. Involuntarily he loosened his hold one moment, in the sharp pain and sudden blindness of the unexpected blow. That moment was enough for her; she wrenched herself from him, flew across the room, tore aside the curtain of one of the windows;—by good fortune it was open, and, without heeding what height she might fall, leaped from its low sill on to the ground without. The window was five feet off the lawn below, but happily for her there lay just where she alighted a large heap of cut grass—all that had been mown off the turf that morning having been gathered together just beneath the window. It broke her fall, but she

lay stunned till Castleton's voice from the chamber made her spring to her feet, like a hare that has lain down panting to rest in its run for life, and starts off again with every nerve quivering and every sense stretched, at the bay of the hounds in pursuit. She sprang to her feet, and ran along the lawn. The grounds were a labyrinth to her, the light was dim and dusky, the rain still fell in torrents, but Alma's single thought was to get away from that horrible house, to which she had been lured for such a horrible fate. She fled across the lawn, and through a grove of young firs, taking the first path that presented itself, the road through the plantation, which led her on about a quarter of a mile; she flew over the dank wet turf with the speed of a hunted antelope. Yet to her, with the dread of pursuit upon her, thinking every moment she heard steps behind her, feeling every instant in imagination the grasp of her hated lover and foe, it seemed as though leaden weights were on her ankles, and each step she took bare her a hundred steps backward. At the end of the plantation was a staken-bound fence, and a high gate, with spikes on its top rail. Her heart grew sick with terror: if she turned back she would fall into Castleton's grasp as surely as a fox that doubles from a wall falls a victim to the

pack. She knew he would pursue her; to retrace her steps would be to meet him, and Alma knew what mercy she would find at his hands. An old man, gathering up his tools after thinning the trees and loosening the earth round the roots, was near the gate, and to him Alma rushed:

‘Let me through! let me through, for God’s sake!’ she gasped, her fingers clenching on his arm, the wild terror on her face telling her story without words.

The old peasant, a hard-featured, kindly-eyed old man, looked at her in amazement.

‘Poor bonny child, where would ye go?’

‘Let me through quick—quick, for the love of Heaven!’ whispered Alma, panting with her breathless race.

Without another question the woodsman unlocked the gate, and let her pass; she flew through it with a murmured ‘God reward you!’ and as he locked the padlock after her, and took up his axe and spade, he muttered to his own thoughts, ‘Castleton would flay me alive if he could for that; but I don’t care—she’s too bonnie a birdie for such an evil cage.’

Once through the gate, she found herself where two cross-roads met; ignorant which led back to London, she took the one on her right and ran

on; the thick drops of the shower, that still fell fast and heavily on her golden hair, that had fallen dishevelled and unbound in her wrestling with Castleton; her heart beating, her delicate limbs, unused to all fatigue, already beginning to fail her, every nerve on the rack in the dread horror of pursuit, strained to such tension that not a bough cracked in the wind or a rain-drop splashed in the puddles but she thought it was his émissaries chasing her. On and on she ran, her hair streaming behind her, heavy and dank with water, her feet soaked and clogged with the weight of the mud gathered fresh with every step, and every sinew throbbing, cracking, aching with that merciless race from what was worse than death. At last she could do no more; with all her terror, all her spirit, ever much greater than her strength, Nature rebelled against the unnatural strain. She could not run, but she walked on and on, halting for breath, toiling wearily, ready to sink down on the wet, cold earth, murmuring every now and then De Vigne's name, or gasping a prayer to God. On she still went, she knew not where, only away—away—for ever from her abhorred pursuer.

Tenderly nurtured, delicately bred, sensitive as a hothouse flower, this child of art, of love, of re-

finement, with her high-wrought imagination, her delicate mould of form and thought, her childlike fear of solitude in darkness, suffered tortures. On and on she dragged her weary way, till the dusky haze of rain and fog deepened to the denser gloom of night, and the storm ceased and the moon came out over the glades of Windsor Forest. She had toiled on till she had reached the outskirts of the royal park, and as the moonlight shivered on the gaunt boughs and played on the wet leaves, Alma stopped, powerless to stir again, and a deadly terror of something vague and unknown crept upon her, for her brain was strongly creative, her nerves tender, her mind steeped in poetry, romance, and out-of-the-world lore even from her childhood, when she had believed in fairies because Shakspeare and Milton wrote of them. A deadly terror came upon her; a hundred wild stories that she would have laughed at at another hour rose in chaos before her mind, bewildered already with the horrors of the past day. She was afraid to be alone with that vast silent forest, those cold, solemn stars! She was afraid of the night, of the stillness, of the solitude; she who but so few hours before had been gathered to her lover's heart and sheltered in his arms, there, as she had thought, to find asylum all her life. She was

afraid; a cold trembling seized her, she looked wildly up at the gaunt boughs and silver foliage in the moonlight; no sound in the hushed night but the hooting of an owl or the clash of the horns of fighting stags. Hideous phantoms glared around; vile shapes gibbered in her ear. One sob rose in her throat, De Vigne's name rang through the quiet woodlands and up to the dark skies, then she fell forward insensible on the tangled moss, her long bright hair trailing on the grass, her fair brow lying on the dank earth, her hands clenched on the gnarled roots.

There she lay; and as if in pity for this fair, fragile, human thing, the summer winds sighed softly over her, and touched her brow with cool caresses as they played among her wet and golden curls. She had no power to move, to stir even a limb; terror, fatigue, that horrible and breathless race through the pitiless storm, had beaten all the young life out of her. Nature could do no more; the spirit could no longer bear up against the suffering of the body; where she had fallen she lay, broken and worn out; if Castleton had been upon her she could not have risen or dragged herself one other step. She was but half conscious; wild thoughts, vague horrors, loathsome sights and sounds, indistinct with the unembodied terrors of

night-dreams, flickered at times before her closed eyes, and hovered on the borders of her brain; still she lay there, powerless to move from the phantasms of her mind, equally powerless to repel them with her will. All volition was gone; terror and bodily fatigue had done their work, till the mind itself at last succumbed, outwearied, and a heavy, dreamless sleep stole on her, the sleep of nature utterly worn out. There she lay on the cold, dank moss, the dark brushwood waving over her, above her the silent heavens, with their chill, pale stars, while the great boughs of the forest stirred with a mournful shiver, and through their silent glades moved, with melancholy sigh and measure, the wind of the summer night.

## CHAPTER II.

## BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH.

THE morning dawned ; the herds of deer rose from their fern couches, and trooped down to the pools for their morning drink, and fragrance rose up from the wet grass that sparkled in the light after the storm of the past day, and from the deep dells, and shadowy glades, and sunny knolls of the Royal Forest. One of the rangers, a white-haired old man, who had lived in the stately woodlands till he loved them almost as men love their own ancestral homes, was going home for his breakfast, when he caught sight of something gleaming white among the brushwood on the outskirts of the forest, and drawing near, saw Alma as she slept. He was going to awaken her somewhat roughly perhaps, but her attitude touched him, and as he stooped over her and marked the fine texture of the dress, soaked through with mud and rain, her delicate hands, the circles under the eyes dark as the lashes resting on them, and the parted lips,

through which every breath came with feverish and painful effort, he shrank involuntarily from touching harshly what seemed so fragile and at his mercy.

He stooped over her perplexed. He did not like to leave her; he did not like to move her.

‘Poor pretty child!’ he muttered, drawing her thick golden hair through his rough fingers. ‘Who’s sent her to such a bed, I wonder? If she’s been lying out all night, she’s caught her death of cold. I should like to take her home, poor young thing; but what would the old woman say?’

The worthy man, being a trifle henpecked, paused at this view of the question; his charity halting before the dread of another’s condemnation of it, as charity in the great world shrinks and hides her head before the dread of the ‘*qu’en dira-t-on!*’ He wavered; he could not leave her there; he was afraid, poor fellow, to take her home, lest a hissing voice should condemn his folly, and a shrew’s vituperations reward him for his Samaritanism; and his dog, with the true instinct and ready kindness with which animals often shame their owners, began to lick the burning hands with his great tongue in honest well-meaning to do good, and to offer what help lay in his power.

As his master wavered, ashamed to leave, afraid to take her with him, a lady and two little girls, a governess and her pupils, walking before their breakfast, drew near, too. The keeper knew them, and looked up as they approached, for they were astonished as well as he at this woman's form, with the white dress and golden hair, lying down on the dark dank moss.

'Dear me, Reuben—dear me, what is this?' asked the governess, a little, tremulous, shy person, while the children's eyes grew round and bright, with wonder and pleasure at seeing something strange to tell when they reached home.

'It's a girl, ma'am,' responded the keeper, literally, while the lady drew near a little cautiously; for, though a good-hearted, gentle creature, she *was* a woman, and by no means exempt from the peculiar theories of her sex; and no lady, we know, will look at another, however in distress or want, unless she knows she is 'proper' for her own pure eyes to rest upon.

'It's a woman,' went on Reuben. 'She looks like a lady, too, ma'am—leastways her face and her hands do—and her dress is like them bits of cobweb that fine ladies wear, that are no good at all for wind and weather. If she's been lying here all night, sure she'll die afore along; by the look on

her, I fear she's been out in all the rain last evening. She's only asleep now, ma'am, though she do look like a corpse, and you see it ain't a little thing for poor people like us to get an invalid into our house for, maybe, two or three months, and a long doctor's bill, and perhaps in the end nothing to pay it with ; and as for the workhouse—'

'Couldn't we take her home with us? I am sure mamma would let us. Don't you think we might, Miss Russel?' asked the younger girl.

'Hush, Cecy! Don't be silly. How could we take a person home that we know nothing about? She can't be a very *nice* person, you are sure, Cecy, or she wouldn't be out here all alone,' said her elder sister, reprovingly, who had already learnt her little lesson in the world's back-reading of charity, and had already a special little jury of her own for haranguing and converting people according to the practices she saw around her.

'Let me look at her, poor young creature. Let me look at this poor young thing!' said the governess, her compassion getting the better of her prudence. She stooped over the figure that lay so motionless amidst all their speculations upon her, turned her face gently towards the light, and, as the sun-rays fell upon it, cried out in bitter horror, 'Alma! Alma! How can she have come

here?’ And, to the children’s wonder, their governess sank on her knees by the girl, pushing the damp hair off her forehead, kissing and weeping over her in her astonishment and her sorrow.

‘Do you know her, ma’am?’ asked the keeper. ‘Do you know her?’ cried the children, in shrill chorus of surprise and curiosity. The poor lady could not answer them at first; she was speechless with bewilderment to find her darling lying here sleeping, with the damp earth for her pillow, out under the morning skies, with nothing to shelter her from night dew or noontide sun, as lonely, as wretched, as homeless as the most abject outcast flying for her life.

Whether she woke or not she could not tell; a heavy, struggling sigh heaved her chest; she tried to turn, but had no power; then her eyes unclosed, but there was no consciousness in them; the lids dropped again immediately; a shiver of icy cold ran through her; she lay motionless as the dead.

‘What can we do with her?’ cried poor Miss Russel, half beside herself with grief for the girl and powerlessness to aid her, for in her own home she was but a dependent. ‘What shall we do!’ cried the poor lady. ‘She will die, if she is half

an hour longer without medical aid. Poor little darling, what can ever have brought her to this—’

‘I’ll take her to our house,’ said Reuben, decided at last. ‘Since you know her, ma’am, that’ll be everything to my missis.’

‘Do, pray do,’ assented the governess, eagerly; she would have done anything that anybody could have suggested, no matter how much to her own hindrance, but by nature she was nervous, timid, and undecided. ‘Take her at once, and pray move her tenderly. I must see the young ladies home, but I shall be at your cottage as soon as you are. Take her up gently. My poor darling!’

Reuben lifted the girl in his arms, and laid the golden head with no harsh touch against his shoulder. They might have taken her where they would, Alma knew nothing of it. Miss Russel looked at her lingeringly a moment; she longed to go with her, but she dared not take her pupils to see a girl whom their reverend father ‘did not know.’ She retraced her steps rapidly, and Reuben went onwards with his burden.

She was as good as her promise, The keeper’s wife, with no over good grace, had but just received her new charge, with much amazement and

grumbling, when the governess came, and helped her to lay Alma on the couch, bathe her burning temples, bind up her long, damp hair, and then wait—wait, unable to do more, till medical aid should arrive.

For six weeks Alma lay on that bed, unable to move hand or foot, unconscious to everything surrounding her, her brow knit with pain, her eyes wide open, without sense or thought, a burning glare in her aching eyeballs, her cheeks flushed deeply, her long hair wet with the ice laid on her temples—her mind gone, not in raving or chattering delirium, but into a strange, dull, voiceless unconsciousness, in which the only tie that linked her to life and reason was that one name which now and then she murmured faint and low, ‘Sir Folko!—Granville!’

The night out in the forest brought on inflammation of the lungs; and against her danger, her own youth, and the skill that grappled for her with death, alone enabled her to battle. At last youth and science conquered; at last the bent brow grew calm, the crimson flush paled upon her face, her breathing grew more even, her voice ceased to murmur its piteous wail, and she slept.

‘She will live now,’ said her doctor, watching that calm and all-healing sleep.

‘Who is that man whose name she mutters so constantly?’ asked Montessor, the doctor, outside her door, while Alma slept.

Miss Russel was somewhat embarrassed to reply; her calm and prudent nature had puzzled in vain over Alma’s strange, expansive attachment, half childish in its frankness, but so wildly passionate in its strength.

‘Really I can hardly tell. I fancy—I believe—she means a friend of Mr. Tressillian’s, of whom I know she was very fond.’

Montessor smiled.

‘Can we find him? He should be within call, for if she has wanted him so much in unconsciousness, she had better not be excited by asking for him in vain when she awakes. What is he?’

‘An officer in the Army—in the Cavalry I believe,’ answered the governess, much more inclined to keep De Vigne away than to bring him there.

‘A soldier? Oh, we can soon learn his whereabouts, then. What is his name, do you know?’

‘Major de Vigne,’ said the governess, reluctantly. Montessor put the name in his note-book. Two days after he called on Miss Russel:

‘I wrote to the Horse Guards for Major de Vigne’s address. They tell me he is gone to the

Crimea. 'Tiresome fellow! he would have been my best tonic.'

The doctor might well say so, for when at length she awoke from the lengthened sleep that had given her back life, enfeebled as she was, so much so that for many days she lay as motionless, though not as unconscious as before, the first words she spoke, which scarcely stirred the air, were:

'Where is he? Bring him here. Pray do; he will come if you tell him I am ill. Go and find him. Go!'

And little as the governess could sympathize with or comprehend this to her strangely reprehensible attachment for a man who, as she thought, had never said a word of affection in return, who certainly had never offered to make Alma his wife—the only act on a man's part that could possibly justify a woman in liking him, according to that prudent and tranquil lady's theory—she grieved solely to have no answer with which to relieve that ceaseless and plaintive question, 'Why does he not come? Why don't you send for him?' and, far from quick at a subterfuge, and loathing a falsehood, she was obliged to have recourse to an evasion.

And Alma, too weak to rebel, too exhausted

still to recall anything of the past, burst into tears, and lay with her face to the wall, weeping low, heart-broken sobs that went to the heart of those who heard them.

‘She will never get well like this,’ said Montessor, in despair at seeing his victory of science over death being undone again as fast as it could. ‘Who is this Major de Vigne? Deuce take the man, why did he go away just when one wanted him the most? Was Miss Tressillian engaged to him?’

‘Not that I ever heard,’ replied Miss Russel, sorely troubled with the subject. ‘But, you see, Mr. Montessor, she has very strong affections, and she has led a strange, solitary life, and Major de Vigne was her grandpapa’s friend, and has been very kind to her since she came to England, but—you know—it would hardly be correct, if he *were* in England, for him to come here—’

‘Correct!’ repeated Montessor, with a smile that the man of the world could not for the life of him repress at the good governess’s prudery, ‘we medical men, my dear lady, have no time to stop for conventionalities when life is in the balance. If Major de Vigne were anywhere in this country I would make him come and quiet my patient by a sight of him; all she does is to sob quietly, and

murmur that man's name to herself, and if we cannot get at the mind we cannot work miracles with the body. Any shock would be better than this dreamy lethargy; there is no knowing to what mischief it may not lead. I shall tell her he is gone to the Crimea !'

'Whom do you wish so much to see?' asked Montessor, gently, when he visited Alma on the morrow and found her lying in the same despondent attitude, no colour in her cheek, no light in her sunk eyes.

Alma's mind was not yet wholly awake, but dim memories of what had passed, and what had brought her there, hovered through her brain, entangled with the phantasma of delirium. All she was fully awake to, and vividly conscious of, was her love for De Vigne: so strong was that that she started up in her bed when Montessor asked the question, her eyes getting back some of their old luminous light.

'Sir Folko—Granville! I am sure they have not told him I am ill, or he would have come. If I could see my old nurse she would tell him—where is she, too? it is so strange—so very strange! Will *you* tell him? do, pray do!' And Alma sank back upon her pillows with a heavy weary sigh.

Montessor put his hand upon her pulse and kept it there.

‘Do you love this friend of yours so much, then?’ he asked her, gently still.

Alma looked at him a moment; then her eyes drooped, her mind was dawning, and with it dawned the recognition of Montessor as a stranger, and that reluctance to speak of De Vigne to others which was blended with her demonstrative frankness *to* him. She answered him more calmly, with a simplicity and fervour which touched Montessor, though the unmasked human nature which his profession had often shown him had made him naturally sceptical of many of the displays of feeling that he saw.

‘Yes,’ said Alma, lifting her eyes to his face. ‘Yes, he is all I have on earth! and he will come to me—he will, indeed—if you will only let him know. I cannot think why he is not here. I wish I could remember—’

She pressed her hands to her forehead—the history of the last two months began to come to her, but still slowly and confusedly.

‘Keep quiet, and you will remember everything.’

Alma shook her head with a faint sign of dissent. ‘Not if you keep him away from me—it is

a plot, I know it is a plot! Why am I to lie here and never see him; it is cruel! I cannot think why you all try to keep him away—'

She was getting excited; two feverish spots burned in her cheeks, and her eyes glowed luridly.

'No one is trying to keep him away,' said Montressor gravely and slowly. 'Who should plot against you, poor child? But your friend is a soldier, and soldiers cannot always be where they would. There is a war, you know, between England and Russia, and Major de Vigne has been sent off to the Crimea.'

He spoke purposely in few and simple words, not to confuse her with lengthened sentences or verbose preparation. As he expected it took instant effect. Alma sprang up in her bed.

'Gone—gone—away from *me*!'

Montressor looked at her kindly and steadily:

'Yes; it was his duty as a soldier.'

'Gone!—gone! Oh, my God! And to war! Gone! and he never came for one farewell. He may be ill, and I shall not be there; he may die, and I shall not know it; he may lie in his grave, and I shall not be with him! Gone!—gone! If it *be* true, let me go to him; God will give me strength, and I love him too well for death to have power over me till I meet him once again.'

In her delirious agony she would have sprung from her couch had not Montessor held her down in a firm grasp.

‘Lie still, and listen to me. It is true Major de Vigne is gone to the Crimea; probably he was ordered off, as officers often are, on a moment’s notice. He may have sent to you, he may have gone to take leave of you, but that would have been at your home, he could not tell that you were here. If you wish to see him again—if you wish, as you say, to follow him to the Crimea—you must calm yourself. If you love your friend, you must do what I am sure he would wish you—your utmost to be quiet and to recover.’

She listened to him with more comprehension in her large, sad eyes than had been in them since Montessor first saw her. ‘Thank you, thank you; you are very kind!’ But then her head drooped on her hands, and a storm of tears convulsed her frame. ‘Gone!—gone! Oh, life of my life, why did you leave me?’

But Montessor did not mind those tears—there were vitality, passion, reality, and strength in them. He left her to go his rounds, and when she was alone, with this shock, all the past, link on link, came slowly to Alma’s mind. That horrible race in the midsummer storm, the terrors

of that night in Windsor Forest, which had ended in bringing her thither, came back upon her memory: and De Vigne had doubtless heard of that flight with Castleton, and, accrediting evil of her, had given her up and gone to the Crimea! She could have shrieked aloud in her agony to have lost him thus.

There was but one remembrance which forced her to calm herself, the one on which Montessor had relied; that to dispel in any way this hideous barrier that had risen up between them, she must recover. In Alma, with all her childlike gaiety and reckless impulsiveness, there was much strong volition, much concentrated fixity of will and purpose; she had not a grain of patience, but she had much resolution.

Reuben's close cottage did not facilitate her restoration; light, air, comforts, atmosphere, all that were most needful for her, were inaccessible there. She had barely strength enough to be lifted from her bed without fainting, and Montessor saw that without the freedom of air, to which she was accustomed, she would never be better.

Miss Russel's rector, like many another rector, since he 'knew nothing of the young person,' would not have thought of wasting one of his spare beds on a stranger 'of no connections,'

and ‘you know, my dear, for anything we can tell, perhaps of no very pure moral character,’ as he remarked to his wife, previous to rustling into church in his stiff and majestic surplice, and giving for his text the story of Mary Magdalene. Montressor was not counted a good man by his rector; indeed, having certain latitudinarian opinions of his own, consequent on his study of man and of nature, and not always keeping them to himself, as privately as prudence and his practice might have suggested, was somewhat of a thorn in the rector’s side, especially as in argument Montressor inevitably floored him with extreme humiliation, and the rector being once driven to define Grace by him was compelled to the extremely uncomfortable and illogical answer, for which he would have scolded his wife’s youngest Sunday scholar, ‘Well, dear me, sir;—why, sir, *grace is grace!*’ Montressor, moreover, did not always go to church, but preferred strolling in Windsor Forest, and thinking of that great God of Nature whom men dwarf in their sermons and exclude from their lives. Therefore, you see it was very natural for poor Miss Russel to look to the rector, and not to Montressor for Charity; but—and I fancy that is as natural too—it was in him and not in the rector that she found it. Montressor

knew that a week or two in a house like his might secure Alma's restoration, while she might linger on and on for an indefinite time in the oppressive atmosphere of Reuben's cottage, close, dark, and unodorous. As soon as she was able to be moved, Alma, too weak to protest against his will, was carried to his house; and there did daily grow stronger and better, and now began to recover as rapidly as she had been slow to do so before.

Mrs. Montessor, young herself, had taken a deep interest in her husband's patient. She received her in her house with delight, and felt a not unpardonable curiosity to know her story, and how she came there that midsummer night. This Alma, as soon as she was able, told her. She spoke very little of De Vigne; his name was too dear to her to bring it forward more than she could help, but all the rest she told frankly and fully, as was due, to her new-found friends.

As soon as ever she had strength enough to write, Alma's first effort was to pen to De Vigne the whole detail of Castleton's plot, pouring out to him all her love and sorrow. When that was done, she sank back on her pillows with more bitter tears than she had ever shed. Many weary weeks must come and pass away, many weary

days must dawn, and many nights must fall, before she could have an answer; and even now, before that reached him, what evil might not have befallen him!

‘Would it cost much money to go to the Crimea?’ she asked her doctor, as he paid her his visit that evening, fixing her eyes on his with their earnest and brilliant regard.

‘A great deal, my little lady.’

‘How much?’ asked Alma, wistfully.

‘A hundred or two, at the least.’

Her lips quivered, and her head drooped with a heavy sigh.

‘Ah, and I have nothing! But, Mr. Montessor, are there not nurses with the army? Have I not heard that ladies sometimes go to be in the hospitals? Could not I go out to him in that way?’

Montessor smiled, amused yet touched.

‘Poor child! you are much fit for a nurse! What do you know of wounds, of sickness, of death? What qualification have you to induce them to give you such an office? Do you think they would take such a fair face as yours among the sick wards? No, no, that is impracticable. You must *wait*: the lesson hardest of all to learn—one, I dare say, you have never had to learn at all.’

It was true she never had, and it was one she never would learn; she would fret her life out like a fettered nightingale, but she never would endure confinement calmly like a caged bird. Not only would she have gone to the Crimea had she been rich, but had she but known of any means she would have worked her way there at any cost or any pain, only to be near him in his danger, and to hear him say that for all the witness against her he knew that she was his and his alone. But Alma had to bow before that curse, under which much that is strongest, noblest, and best in Genius, Talent, and Love, has gone down, never able to shake off its cruel chain upon their wings, the barren curse of—Want of Money!

Of course she was desirous to leave Montessor's house as soon as she was able, and warmly as they pressed her to stay, she fixed the earliest day she could bear the drive for her return to St. Crucis. She had not waited till her return to know when and how De Vigne had heard of her flight with Castleton. Old Mrs. Lee had written her word, as calm lookers-on often do write of the fiercest passions and bitterest sorrows that pass unseen before their very eyes, 'The Major called, my darling child, and I told him all as I thought it to be, but as, thank Almighty God, it wasn't.

He took it uncommon quiet like, and walked out, and I haven't seen not nothing of him since.'

How deep into Alma's heart went those few common words 'uncommon quiet like, and then walked out.' What volumes they spoke to her of that mighty passion, still and iron-bound as the ice mountains of the Arctic; but as certain as they to burst and break away, bringing death and destruction in its fall! More for the suffering she had caused him, than for that which had fallen upon herself, did Alma mourn for the impetuosity, which had flung her so unconscious an assistant into Castleton's plot. 'If he die *I* shall have murdered him!' That was the one cry, that went up from her heart every hour.

The day was fixed for her to leave Windsor for St. Crucis. Montessor and his wife were both unwilling to part with her; for her story had all won them to her; and there was a peculiar, nameless charm in her foreign fervour, joined to the childlike softness of her voice and manners.

'The Molyneux are going to Paris,' said Montessor to his wife, the morning before Alma left them.

'Indeed! Why and when?'

'Well, in the first place, Miss Molyneux must have change of air somewhere. I suggested Italy,

but she would not hear of it! her mother, Paris, to which her ladyship has certain religious, social, and fashionable leanings, all drawing her at once; and to that she assented. *Pour cause*, it is nearer the Crimea!’

‘Is that Violet Molyneux?’ asked Alma, eagerly. They had fancied her asleep upon the sofa. ‘Is she not married to Colonel Sabretasche?’

‘No!’ answered Montessor. ‘A fortnight before their wedding-day, his first wife, whom he believed dead, came forward and asserted her rights. I never heard all the details. Now he has gone to the Crimea—but do you know her?’

‘Yes! Another wife!—how she must hate that woman!’ And Alma shuddered as she thought how *she* would have hated the Trefusis if that lie, that fable, had been true!

‘And the wife, eh, what pity, for her, Miss Tressillian!’ smiled Montessor.

Alma shook her head. ‘None! If she had left her husband all those years, long enough to make him think her dead, she could care nothing for him.’

‘Perhaps *he* left *her*. More probable!’

‘Is Colonel Sabretasche gone to the Crimea?’ asked Alma, disregarding his suggestion. It

touched her strangely, this story of that radiant belle whom she had once envied.

‘Yes, and he could hardly have refused the campaign, even had it taken him from his bridal days.’

‘No; but she would have gone with him!—and they are going to Paris, you say?’

‘Yes, I recommended it; so did Dr. Watson, when he sounded Miss Molyneux’s lungs, and agreed with me that there was no mischief yet, though there may be before long. After her parting with the Colonel, she lay in a dead swoon, from which they could not wake her. They sent for the physicians and for me; and since then she has never truly recovered; she will smile, she will talk to her mother, to her friends; but her health suffers. Lady Molyneux would like to have a companion for her in Paris; the Vicountess will have a thousand religious excitements and social amusements, in which her daughter will not participate. I did not know—I thought would you—’ And Montessor hesitated; for though he knew how unprovided for, Alma was, he had too much delicacy to touch upon it.

‘Would they take me?’ said Alma, lifting her head. The sentence ‘Paris is nearer the Crimea’ rang in her ear.

‘Would you go?’

‘Yes, yes—if I am free to leave them when I will. Miss Molyneux was very kind to me; I think she would take me if she knew.’

‘I will mention it to the Viscountess when I go to town to-morrow,’ said Montessor. ‘Since you know them, I have no doubt she will be very happy to give you the preference, and change of air will do you good as well as her daughter.’

Montessor was as good as his word. Some years before, Violet’s brother, then a graceless Etonian, now a young attaché to the British Legation at Paris, had been nearly drowned in the Thames, and had been pulled out at last to go through a severe attack of bronchitis, which all but cost him his life, would probably have done so quite but for Montessor, to whom Jockey Jack was so grateful for saving his heir’s life, that he gave the doctor the most beautiful mare in his stables, and had him called in whenever there was any illness in the family, though Montessor, at the onset, had mortally offended Madame by assuring her she would have very good health if she would only leave off sal-volatile, and get up before one o’clock in the day. On that Lady Molyneux had had nothing more to say to him till her pet physician, who had kept her good graces by

magnifying her migraines and flattering her nerves, had once very nearly killed her by doctoring her for phthisis when her disease was but the more unpoetic ailment of the liver. Since that time he had always had a certain influence over the Viscountess, possibly because he was the only man who had seen her without her rouge, and told her the truth courteously but uncompromisingly, and when he mentioned Alma as a companion for Violet, her ladyship graciously acquiesced. ‘Miss Tressillian? She did not recollect the name. Very likely she had seen her, but she really could not remember. Artist, was she? Oh, she thought she *had* some recollection of a girl Violet patronized, but she couldn’t remember. If Mr. Montessor recommended her, that was everything; as long as she was ladylike and of unimpeachable character, that was all she required. She only wanted her to be with them in case Violet were unwell or declined society. She must be free to leave them any day she chose? What a very singular stipulation! However, rather than have any more trouble about it, would he have the goodness to tell her she would give her fifty guineas and her travelling expenses; and they should leave London that day week.’

‘Fifty guineas! Less than her maid makes by

her place!’ thought Montessor, as he threw himself into a hansom to drive back to the Waterloo station. He was a generous man himself; he had no cant of benevolence about him; he considered that to people delicately nurtured, the struggles, the mortification, the narrowed lines of poverty are far harder than to the poor, born amidst squalor, nurtured in deprivation, whose most resplendent memories and dreams are of fat bacon and fried potatoes. He was generous, but discriminately so: and though he compelled his just dues from the man who had lamb and peas at their earliest, while by a wobegone face and dexterous text he was making the rector believe him an object of profoundest pity, Montessor would not take a farthing from the young girl, on whose delicate organization and quick susceptibilities he knew the poverty, from which her own talents had alone protected her, and from which in illness they could not guard her, must prey heavily.

## CHAPTER III.

ONE OF THOSE WHOM ENGLAND HAS FORGOTTEN.

THE chill Crimean winds blew from the north of Sebastopol, and the dust whirled and skerried before our eyes, as we kept the line in front of Cathcart's Hill on the morning of the 8th September, while the Guards stood ready in Woronzoff Road, and the Second and Light Divisions moved down to the trenches, and the Staff stationed themselves in the second parallel of the Green Hill Battery, and the amateurs, who had come out to see what was doing in the Crimea, as they went other years to Norwegian fishing or Baden roulette, were scattered about in yachting costume, and stirred to a little excitement as the Russian shells began to burst among us, and the bombs to fall with thuds loud enough to startle the strongest nerves.

What would young ladies at home, full of visions of conquering heroes and myrtle and bay leaves, and all the pomp and circumstances of

war, have said if, in that cold, dusty, raw Crimean morning, they had seen General Simpson, with only nose and eyes exposed, coddled up in a great-coat; and General Jones, a hero in spite of costume, in his red *bonnet de nuit*, a more natural accompaniment to a Caudle lecture than to a siege; and Sir Richard, with his pocket-handkerchief tied over his ears after the manner of old ladies afflicted with catarrh? Ah me! it was not much like Davy Baird leading the forlorn hope under the hot sun of Seringapatam, or Wellington, 'pale but ever collected,' giving his prompt orders from the high ground behind San Christoval! Yet, God knows, there was daring and gallantry enough that day to have made of the Redan a second Ciudad Rodrigo; that it was not so, was no fault of the troops; the men whom Unett and Windham tossed up to lead, would, had they been allowed, have given England Success as they gave her Pluck: and the dead bodies piled high on the slopes of the Great Redan, were offered up as cheerfully as though the fancied paradise of the Mahometan soldier awaited them, instead of the ordinary rewards of the British one—abuse and oblivion.

We could see little beyond the great dull parapets of the Redan, and the troops that were

pouring into and over it, and, though they were forced back again under the dense smoke of the Russian musketry, twice capturing the position, and twice pushed back down the slopes, slippery with human blood and piled with human bodies. It was afterwards, from the wounded that were brought down the Woronzoff Road, and from the remnant that came back unscathed from the reeking salient, that we heard the detail of the struggle.

We heard how three times Windham sent for the support, without which nothing decisive could be done in that fatal scene of carnage, where the British, unbacked, had nothing but broken ranks to oppose to the steady fire of the enemy, and to the fresh troops who were swarming from the town and the evacuated Malakoff. We heard how, when at last he had leave ‘to take the Royals,’ the permission came too late. We heard how hand-to-hand our fellows stood their ground against the granite mass, that, swelling every moment from the rear, pressed down upon them, till those who had held the salient, (unsupported for an hour and three-quarters, under a fire that thinned their ranks as a scythe mows down meadow grass, grappling to the last with the Russians in the embrace of death,) were

forced from the loose earth and breaking gabions which made their ground, pelted with great stones, and driven down by the iron tramp that crushed alike friend and foe, till slipping, panting, bleeding, exhausted, pêle-mêle they fell on to the mass of bayonets, muskets, and quivering life mingled together in the ditch below; the men rolling over each other like loose stones down a crevasse; the living crushed by the dead, the dying struggling under the weight of the wounded; the scarps giving way and burying the living, while those who could struggle from the horrible heap of human life, where the men lay four deep, ran for life and death to reach the English trench. We heard that, and more too. Sad stories passed from one to another. We were all down in the mouth that night; for though the officers had been game as men could be, flinging down their lives as of no account, their men had not imitated them; and it was hardly the tale that we, after the long winter of '54-'55, and the weary, dreary, hopeless months of inaction, had hoped to be rewarded with, by sending home to England. Wellington was wont to say that the saddest thing, after a defeat, was a victory. I think his iron heart would have broken over the

loss of human life, on the parapets of the Redan.

We knew that Curly was to lead the —th with the Light Division that day, and we thought of him anxiously enough when we saw from Cathcart's Hill the smoke pouring out from the rugged parapets, and the troops fighting their way over, only to be sent forth again decimated and exhausted.

I saw him early on the morning of the 8th, when we were all looking forward to the attack, as he was chatting with some other fellows, dressed in that careless nondescript costume which dandies of the Queen's had adopted, his old gay smile on his lips, a cap much the worse for wind and weather on those silky yellow locks that we had teased his life out about in the old school-days; and a pipe of good Turkish tobacco peering out from beneath his long blond moustaches. As we paced past him in the raw grey morning, I laughingly wished him good luck; he laughed, too, as he told us he was going in for the honours now. De Vigne, as we passed, pulled up his horse for a second, bent from his saddle, and gave him his hand, with a sudden impulse; for the first moment Curly's eyes flashed with angry fire; then the better spirit in him conquered, his hand

closed firm and warm on De Vigne's, and they looked at one another as they had used to do in days gone by, before the love of woman had parted them.

There was no time for speech; that cordial shake of their hands was their silent greeting and farewell, and we rode onwards to form the line on Cathcart's Hill. I think De Vigne thought more than once of his old school pet, when, from our post, we saw the ramparts of the Redan belching forth fire and smoke, and the ambulances coming down the Woronzoff Road with their heavy and pitiful burdens. Both he and I, I fancy, thought a good deal about Curly that day, as we saw them through the clouds of dust and smoke scale the parapet, then lost them amidst the obscurity which the fire of the musketry and the flames of the burning embrasure raised around the scene of carnage and confusion; and whether he was there among the remnant who were forced over the parapet and fell, or jumped, *pêle-mêle* into that mass of human misery below, where English pluck was still so strong among them that some laughs they say were heard at their own misery, we could not tell. But late that night, Kennedy, one of his sergeants, told to De Vigne and me, and a few other men, another

of those stories of individual heroism so great in their example, so unfortunate in their reward; telling it in rough, brief words, with an earnestness that gave it eloquence to us, with those frowning ramparts in front, and those crowded hospitals behind:

‘We was a’most the first into the Redan, Major. When I see the ladders, so few, and what there was on ’em so short, I began to think as how we should never get in at all; but Colonel Brandling, he leaped into the ditch and scrambled up the other side as quick as a cat, with a cheer to do your heart good, and we went a’course after him and scaled the parapet, while the Russians ran back and got behind the traverses to fire upon us as soon as we got atop. What possessed ’em I don’t know, Major, but you’ve heard that some of our men began loading and file-firing instead of follering their officers to the front; so many trench-bred infantry men *will* keep popping away for ever if you let ’em; but the Colonel led on to the breastwork with his cigar in his mouth, just where he’d put it for a lark when he jumped on the parapet. There was nobody to support us, and our force weren’t strong enough to carry it, and we had to go back and get behind the traverses, where our men were

firing on the Russians, and there we stayed, sir, packed together as close as sheep in a fold, firing into the Redan as long as our powder lasted. I can't tell you, Major, very well how it all went on; it wasn't a right assault like, it was all hurryscurry and confusion, and though the officers died game, they couldn't form the troops 'cause they were so few, sir, and the salient so narrow. But it was the Colonel I was to tell you about, Major. I was beside him a'most all the time. At first he seemed as if nothing *would* hit him; one ball knocked his cap off, and another grazed his hair, but he took it all as careless as if he was at a ball, and he just turned to me, sir, with his merry smile: "Good fun, eh, Kennedy?" Them was the last words he spoke, sir. Just at that minute the enemy charged us with the bayonet, and the devils behind 'em began to pour volleys on us from the breast-work. Four of them Russians closed round the Colonel, and he'd nothing but his sword against their cursed bayonets. I closed with one on 'em; he was as hard as death to grip with. The Colonel killed two of 'em off hand, though they was twice as big as he, but the third, just as his arm was lifted, ran him right through the left lung. Then he fell straight down, Major, and I was a going to fight my way to him and carry him

off in my arms, and I *would* ha' done it, sir, too, but the Russians pressed so hard on the front ranks that they pushed us straight off the parapet, and I only caught a sight of the Colonel lifting himself up on his elbow, and waving us on with a smile—God bless him!—and then I fell over into the ditch, with Pat O'Leary a-top of me, and I see him no more, Major, and he must be dead, sir, or else a prisoner in that d—d city.'

And honest Kennedy, whose feeling had carried him beyond recollection of delicate language or other presence than his own, stopped abruptly. In his own words, he 'felt like a fool,' for Curly, like Eman of the 41st, was loved by all the men who served under him.

De Vigne set his teeth hard as he listened. Memories of his Frestonhills pet thronged upon him; the little fellow who had been so eager for his notice, so proud of his patronage; the merry, light-hearted child, with his golden locks and his fearless spirits; the wild young Cantab; the dandy Guardsman; the warm, true, honest heart, unstained by the world he lived in; the friend, the rival! Poor little Curly!—and he was lying yonder, behind those smoking ramparts, wounded and a prisoner—perhaps dead!

For an instant De Vigne's eyes flashed with

eagle glance over the stormed city, lying there grim and gaunt, in the shadow of the gray-hued day; I believe he would not have hesitated to cross those death-strewn lines alone, and rescue Curly or fall with him.

The Crimea is not so far distant but the world, knows how we were awakened, the morning after, by the Russian general's masterly retreat, by thunder louder than that which had stunned our ears for twelve months long, by the explosion of the Flagstaff and Garden batteries, by the tramp of those dense columns of Russian infantry passing to the opposite side, by the glare of the flames from Fort Nicholas, by the huge columns of black smoke rising from Fort Paul, by the sight of that fair and stately Empress of the Euxine abandoned and in flames—Little did the people at home—hearing Litanies read and hymns sung in the village churches among the fresh English woodlands—dream what a grand funeral mass for our dead was shaking the earth with its echoes that Sabbath morning in the Crimea.

It was as late as Wednesday, before De Vigne and I got passes from the Adjutant-General's office, and went into the town before whose granite ramparts we had lain watching and waiting for twelve weary months. What a road it

was through the French works! a very fair Rosamond's maze of trenches, zig-zags, and parallels, across the sap, threading our way through the heaps of dead, where the men lay so thickly one on the other, just as they had fallen, shoulder to shoulder, till we were inside the Malakoff. Four piles of dead were heaped together like broken meat on a butcher's stall—not a whit more tenderly—and cleared out of the way like carrion; the ground was broken up into great pools of blood, black and noisome; troops of flies were swarming like mimic vultures on bodies still warm, on men still conscious, crowding over the festering wounds (for these men had lain there since Saturday at noon!), buzzing their death-rattle in ears already maddened with torture. *That* was what we saw in the Malakoff, what we saw a little later in the Great Redan, where among cook-houses, brimful of human blood, English and Russian lay clasped together in a fell embrace, petrified by death; where the British lay in heaps, mangled beyond recognition by their dearest friends, or scorched and blackened by the recent explosions; and where—how strange they looked there!—there stood outside the entrance of one of the houses, a vase of flowers, and a little canary! But we did not stay to notice the once white and

stately city, now black and broken with our shot ; we went straight on towards Fort Paul, as yet untouched, where stood the hospital, that chamber of horrors, that worse than charnel-house, from which strong men retreated, unable to bear up against the loathsome terrors it enclosed. That long low room, with its arched roof, its square pillars, its dim, cavernous light coming in through the shattered windows, was a sight worse than all the fabled horrors of painter, or poet, or author ; full of torment—torment to which the cruelest torture of Domitian or Nero were mercy—a hell where human frames were racked with every possible agony, not as a chastisement for sin, but as a reward for heroism ! De Vigne, used as he had been to death and pain, closed his eyes involuntarily as he entered. There they lay, packed as closely together as dead animals in a slaughter-house—the many Russians, the few English soldiers, who had been dragged there after the assault, to die as they might ; they would but have cumbered the retreat, and their lives were valueless now ! There they lay ; some on the floor that was slippery with blood like a shamle ; some on pallets, saturated with the stream that carried away their life in its deadly flow ; some on straw, crimson and noisome, the home of the most

horrible vermin ; some dead hastily flung down to be out of the way, black and swollen, a mass of putrefaction, the eyes forced from the sockets, the tongue protruding, the features distended in hideous grotesqueness ; other dead, burnt, and charred in the explosion, a heap of blanched bones and gory clothes and blackened flesh, the men who but a few hours before had been instinct with health and hope and gallant fearless life ! Living men in horrible companionship with these corpses, writhing in torture which there was no hand to relieve, no help from heaven or earth to aid, with their jagged and broken limbs twisted and powerless, were calling for water, for help, for pity ; shrieking out in wild delirium or disconnected prayer the name of the woman they had loved or the God who had forsaken them, or rolling beneath their wretched beds in the agony of pain and thirst which had driven them to madness, glaring out upon us with the piteous helplessness of a hunted animal, or the ferocious unconsciousness of insanity.

We passed through one of these chambers of terrors, our hearts sickened and our senses reeling at the hideous sight, the intolerable stench, that met us at every step. Great God ! what must those have endured who lay there days and nights with not a drop of water to soften their baked

throats, not a kind touch to bind up their gaping wounds, not a human voice to whisper pity for their anguish ; before their dying eyes scenes to make a strong man reel and stagger, and in their dying ears the shrieks of suffering equal to their own, the thunder of exploding magazines, the shock of falling fortresses, the burst of shells falling through the roof, the hiss and crash and roar of the flaming city round them !

We passed through one chamber in which we saw no one who could be Curly, or at least who we could believe was he ; for few of the faces there could have been recognized by their nearest and their dearest, since not Edith's quest of Harold wanted so keen an eye of love, as was needed to seek for friend or brother, in the hospital of Sebastopol.

We entered a second room, where the sights and the odours were yet more appalling than in the first. Beside one pallet De Vigne paused and bent down ; then his dark bronze cheek grew white, and he dropped on his knee beside the wretched bed—at last he had found Curly. Curly ! still alive, in that scene of misery, lying on the mattress that was soaked through with his life-blood, the wound in his shoulder open and festering, his eyes closed, his bright hair dull and damp

with the dew of suffering that stood upon his brow, his face of a livid blue-white hue; the gay, gallant, chivalrous English gentleman, thrown down to die, as he would not have had a dog left in its suffering. On one side of him was a black charred corpse, swollen in one place, burnt to the bone in another; the woman that loved him best could not have known that hideous mass! On the other side of him, close by, was a young Russian officer but just dead, with his hands, small and fair as a girl's, filled with the straw that he had clutched at in his death-agony; and between these two dead men lay Curly.

De Vigne knelt down beside him, lifting his head upon his arm. ‘My God, Arthur, is he dead?’

At the familiar voice his eyes unclosed, first with a dreamy vacant stare in them—his mother's heart would have broken at the wreck of beauty in that face, so fair, so delicate, but a few days before!

‘Curly, Curly, dear old fellow!—don't you know me?’

Curly looked at him dreamily, unconsciously. ‘What! is that the prayer-bell? Is the Doctor waiting?’

His thoughts were back among the old school-

days at Frestonhills, when we first met at the old Chancery—when we little thought how we were doomed to part under the murderous shadow of Fort Paul.

De Vigne bent nearer to him. ‘Look at me, dear old boy. You must know *me*, Curly.’

But he did not; his head tossed wearily from side to side, the fever of his wounds had mounted to his brain, and he moaned out delirious disconnected words.

‘Why don’t they form into line, Kennedy—why don’t they form into line? If there were more of us, we could take that breastwork. Water?—water! Is there not a drop of water *anywhere*? We shall die of thirst. I should like to die in harness, but it is hard to die of thirst like a mad dog—like a mad dog—ha! ha!’ (Both of us shuddered, as the mocking, hideous laughter rang through the chamber of death.) ‘Alma! Who talked of Alma? Can’t you bring her here before I die? I think she would be kinder to me now, perhaps; I loved her very much; she did not care for me—she loves De Vigne. You know how I have hated him—my God! how I have hated him—and yet—Oh, for mercy sake, give me water—water for the love of Heaven!’

At the muttered raving words De Vigne’s face

grew as livid for the moment as that of the dead Russian beside him, and his hand trembled as he took a flask from his belt that he had filled with brandy before starting, and held it to Curly's lips. How eagerly he drank and drank, as if life and reason would flow back to him with the draught! For a time it gave him strength to fling off the faintness and delirium fastening upon him, his eyes grew clearer and softer, and as De Vigne raised him into a sitting posture, and supported him on his arm with all the gentle care of a woman, he revived a little, and looked at him with a conscious and grateful regard.

‘De Vigne! How do you come here! Where am I? Oh! I know; is the city taken, then?’

Dying as he was, the old spirit in him rallied and flashed up for a brief moment, while De Vigne told him how the Russians had retreated, leaving Sebastopol in flames. But he was too far gone to revive long; he lay with his head resting on De Vigne's arm, his eyelids closed again, his breathing faint and quick, all his beauty, and his manhood, and his strength, stricken down into the saddest wreck that human eyes can, see and human passions cause. Few could have recognized him in the wounded wretch who was stretched on that gore-stained pallet, with his life ebbing away sim-

ply for want of that common care that a friendless beggar would have been given at home.

‘Is the city won?’ he asked again; his low and feeble words scarcely heard in the shrieks, the moans, the muttered prayers, the groans, the oaths around him.

‘Yes; they have abandoned it to us,’ De Vigne answered, not heeding the pestilence of which the air was reeking, and from which many a man as strong as he, had turned heart-sick away.

‘I am glad of that,’ said Curly, dreamily. ‘England is sure to win; she is never beaten, is she? I should like to fight once more for her, but I never shall, old fellow; the days here—how many are they?—have done for me. It is hard to die like this, De Vigne?’ And a shudder ran through his frame, that was quivering with every torture. ‘God knows, I longed to fall in the field, but not a bullet would hit me *there*; however, it does not matter; it comes to the same thing. Tell my mother I die quite content, quite happy. Tell her not to regret me, I have thought of her often, very often—and bid my father if he loves me, to be kinder to Gus—Gus was a good old boy, though we made game of him.’

Curly paused; slowly and painfully as he had spoken, the exertion was greater than his fading

strength could bear; he, three days before, full of manly vigour, grace, and beauty, was powerless as a new-born child, helpless as a paralyzed old man; stricken down like a gracious and beautiful cedar-tree by the hacking strokes of the woodman's axe, its life crushed, its glory withered, only to be piled amidst a heap of others to make the bonfires for a conqueror's ovation!

De Vigne bent over him, his cheek growing whiter as he thought of the boy's early promise and sunny boyhood, and of the man's death, amidst such horror, filth, and desolation as England would have shuddered to compel her paupers, her convicts, nay, the very unowned dogs about her streets, to suffer in; yet made small count of having forced on her heroes, to die in like murrained cattle.

‘Curly, dear Curly,’ he whispered, pushing off the clammy hair from Brandling's forehead as gently as any woman, ‘why talk of death? Once out of this d—d hole you will get well, old fellow; you SHALL get well. We shall have many a day together still at home among the bracken and the stubble.’

Curly smiled faintly:

‘No! I do not die from the wounds; what has killed me, De Vigne’—and at the memory the old

delirious vagueness grew over his eyes, which wandered away into the depths of his dire prison-house—‘have been the sights, the scents, the sounds. Oh, my God, the horrors I have seen! In sermons we used to hear them try sometimes to describe a hell; if those preachers had been here as I have been, they would have seen we don’t want devils to help us make one—men are quite enough! The stench, the ravings, the roar of the flames round us, the vile creeping things, the blasphemy, the prayers, the horrible thirst—oh, God! I *prayed* for madness, De Vigne; prayed for it as I never prayed for anything in all my life before, and yet, I am no coward either!’

He stopped again, a deathly gray spread over his face, and a cold shiver ran through him; the brain, last of all to die, the part immortal and vital amidst so much death, triumphed yet awhile over the dissolution of the body. Curly knew that he was dying fast, and signed De Vigne down nearer still to him.

‘De Vigne, when the war is over, and you go back to England, first of all try and seek out Alma.’

The fierce red blood crimsoned De Vigne’s very brow; had it been a living and not a dying man who had dared to breathe that name to him, he

would have provoked a reply he would have little cared to hear. All the mad passion, all the infinite tenderness there were in his heart, for his lost love, rose up at the abrupt mention of her.

‘Will you promise me?’ asked Curly; to give me peace in my death-hour, promise me.’

‘No,’ said De Vigne, between his teeth, clenched like an iron vice. ‘I cannot promise you. Why should you wish me? You loved her yourself—’

‘*Because* I loved her myself, because I love her still; love her so well, that it is the thought that in my grave I shall never hear her voice, never see her eyes, *never meet her again*, that makes me shrink from death,’ said Curly; an unutterable tenderness and despair in those faint broken tones whose last utterance was Alma’s name. ‘I *do* love her, too well to believe what you believe, that she is Castleton’s mistress.’

De Vigne’s hands clenched the straw of the pallet like a man in bodily agony.

‘For God’s sake be silent! Do not drive *me* to madness. Do you think I should believe it without proof?—’

‘On the spur of anger and jealousy you *might*. I do not know, I cannot tell, but I could never think her capable of falsehood, of dishonour,’

whispered Curly, his breath growing shorter, his eyes more dim, though even on his haggard cheek a flush just rose, wavered, and died out, as he went on : ‘The day she—she—rejected me I accused her of her love for you, and then she answered me as a woman would hardly have done if she had not cared for you very dearly. Before I left England I left all I had to her ; it is little enough, but it will keep her from want. Let some one seek her out, even though she were sunk in the lowest shame, and see that they give her my money. It will save her from the vile abyss to which Castle-ton would leave her to sink down as she might;—as she must. Promise me, De Vigne,—or you, Chevasney,—promise me, or I cannot die in peace.’

‘No, no, *I* promise you.’

Hoarse and low as De Vigne’s voice was, Curly heard it, a look of gratitude came into the eyes once so bright and fearless, now so dim and dull.

‘And if you find that she does love you, you will not reward her for her love as we have done too many?’

Whiter and whiter yet grew De Vigne’s face, as his hands clenched harder on the straw of Curly’s bed ; it was some moments before he spoke :

‘I *dare* not promise that. God help me!’

But his words fell on ears deaf at last to the harsh fret and bustle of the world; the faintness of that terrible last struggle of brain and body with the coming chill of death, had crept over poor Curly. Sudden shiverings seized him, the mind, vanquished at last, began to wander from earth—whither who can dare to say?—dark-blue shadows deepened under his hollow eyes, the life in him still lingered, as though loth to leave the form so brief a space ago full of such beautiful youth, such gracious manhood. To watch it flickering, struggling, growing fainter and fainter, ebbing away so slowly, so surely, dying out painfully, reluctantly; and to know that it might all have been spared by the common care that at home would be given to a horse—to a dog! God knows, there are sights and thoughts in this world that might well turn men to fiends! He gave one sigh, one heavy sigh deep drawn, and turned upon his side: ‘My mother—Alma!’ Those were the last words he uttered; then—all light died out of his eyes, and the life so young, so brave, so gallant, had fled away for ever.

De Vigne bent over the reeking straw that was now the funeral bier of as loyal a heart as ever spent itself in England’s cause; and bitter tears, wrung

from his proud eyes, fell on the cold brow, and the rigid features that never more would light up with the kind, fond, fearless smile of friendship, truth, and welcome.

‘I loved him,’ he muttered. ‘God help me! Such is ever my fate! My mother—Alma—Curly—*all* lost; and no bullet will come to me!’

In his own arms De Vigne bore Curly out from the loathsome charnel-house, where the living had been entombed with the dead. We buried him with many another, as loyal and gallant as he, who had died on the slope of the Great Redan; and we gave him a soldier’s gravestone; a plain white wood cross with his name and his regiment marked upon it, such as were planted thick in, those two long years, on the hills and valleys of the Crimea. God knows if it be there now, or if the Russian peasant have struck it down and levelled the little mound with his ploughshare and the hoofs of his heavy oxen. We have left him in his distant grave. England, whom he remembered in his death-hour, has forgotten him long ere this. Like many another soldier lying in the green sierras of Spain, among the pathless jungle of the tropics, amidst the golden corn of Waterloo, and the white headstones upon Cathcart’s Hill;

the country for which he fell scarcely heard his name, and never heeded his fate. There he lies in his distant grave, the white and gleaming City he died to win stately and restored to all her ancient beauty; the waters of the Alma rolling through its vineyards as peacefully as though no streams of blood had ever mingled with its flow; the surge of the Euxine Sea beating slowly on the Crimean sands a requiem for the buried dead. There he lies in his distant grave; God requite England if ever she forget him, and those who braved his danger, found his death, and shared his grave.

## CHAPTER IV.

## HOW INCONSTANCY WAS VOTED A VIRTUE.

THERE was a ball at the Tuileries; that stately palace which has seen so many dynasties and so many generations, from the polished Pairs de France gathered round the courtly and brilliant Bourbons, to the Maréchaux roturiers, with their strong swords and their broad accents, crowding about the Petit Caporal, taking camp tone into palace salons. There were at the Tuileries that night all the English élite, of course, in honour of the 'alliance;' and there was among the other foreign guests one Prince Carl of Vallenstein-Seidlitz, an Austrian, with an infinitesimal duchy and a magnificent figure, at all, strong fellow, with the blue eyes and fair hair of the Teuton race, a man of few words and only two passions: the one for 'belles tailles,' the other for 'gros jeu.'

He had been exchanging a few monosyllables with the Empress, and now leant against the wall of one of the other reception-rooms, regarding,

with calm admiration, the beauty of the Duchesse d'Albe, until his attention wandered to a new face that he had not seen before, and he turned to a young fellow belonging to the British Legation, and demanded, with more consideration of brevity than of grammar, ‘*Qui ?*’

‘*Ma sœur, mon Prince.*’

‘*Ciel ! quelle taille ; pas trop grande, mais quelle taille !*’

With which, for him, warm encomium Prince Carl stroked his blonde moustaches and studied her silently for five minutes. Then he asked another question :

‘Why have I never seen her ?’

‘Because she is in love with a married man who is in the Crimea, and but for my mother she would never go into society.’

‘Hein ! A married man ! Haw, women love forbidden fruit ! Introduce her to me.’

Rushbrooke Molyneux introduced the Duke of Vallenstein-Seidlitz to his sister, and the bold Teuton eyes fastened on Violet with delight at that lovely form, whose grace and outline eclipsed all he had ever seen. I am not sure that a casual observer would have noticed any change in our brilliant belle. The eyes had lost their *riant* and cloudless regard ; and the smile that had before

been so spontaneous and so heartfelt, now faded off her lips the moment courtesy ceased to require it. Beyond that, there was little alteration. At her years the most bitter curse upon the mind does not stamp itself upon the features ; moreover she knew that she was pitied and that he was blamed, and that knowledge was sufficient to rouse her Irish spirit to face the world, which would only have amused itself with her sorrow and taken occasion for fresh condemnation of him : so—she let the wolf gnaw at her vitals, but suffered no word of pain to escape which might be construed into a reproach to the absent.

Vallenstein looked on her *belle taille*, and on her proud face, never noticing the weary depths in the eyes that seemed ‘looking afar off,’ and the haughty chillness of tone into which Violet, surrounded with men who would willingly have taught her to forget, had unconsciously fallen in self-defence ; but thought to himself, as he drove away to a less formal entertainment at the Café Anglais : ‘*Qui le diable est ce peste d’homme marié ? N’importe ! Je la ferai l’oublier.*’ And Lady Molyneux thought, as her maid unfastened her diamond tiara : ‘If the cards are played well, I may make Violet Duchess of Vallenstein-Seidlitz. It would be the best match of the season. What

a pity it seems Sabretasche has never had anything happen to him!—if he were not in that Crimea, alive, to write her letters and feed this romance, I could soon bring her to reason. However, as it is, a great deal may be done by firmness; if I could only persuade Violet how utterly unnecessary a grande passion is—indeed, in marriage, positively inconvenient! Her dresses mount up very expensively. I *must* have that lace—only three hundred guineas, dirt cheap! and I don't believe the women will let me have it unless I pay part of their bill, tiresome creatures. I paid them up every farthing seven years ago, but that sort of persons grows so rude now-a-days, instead of being thankful for one's custom, that it is utterly insufferable. I must certainly marry Violet to somebody, and I will not procrastinate about it any longer. I shall be firm with her!’

The Molyneux had come to winter in Paris. Corallyne, though it looked well enough in Burke, was utterly uninhabitable; London was out of the question till March, and the Viscountess, tired of travelling, and bored with the Bads, had taken a suite in an hotel in the Champs Elysées, where she contrived to spend her days tolerably pleasantly, especially as there was a remarkably handsome Confessor, who gave her unusual pi-

quancy in her religious excitements, and made her think seriously of the duties of auricular confession. (It is commonly said that women make the best devotees—doubtless for causes too lengthy to enter upon here—but I wonder, if religions had no priests how many of their fairer disciples would they retain?) And now, Lady Molyneux had another object in life—to woo Prince Carl for her daughter. Bent on that purpose, she tried to make the Hôtel Clâchy very delightful to him, and succeeded. Violet paid him no attention—barely as much as courtesy dictated to a man of his rank and to her father's guest—but he cared nothing for conversation, and as long as she sat there, however haughtily silent, and he could admire her *belle taille* as he liked, he wished for no words, though he might have desired a few smiles. Still she was the first woman who had neglected him, and to men as courted as the Austrian this is a better spur than any, and he really grew interested when he found it not so easy '*de la faire oublier*.'

'*C'est en bon train*,' thought my lady; 'if only Violet were more tractable, and Sabretasche would not write!'—would not *live* was in her thoughts, but naturally so religiously-minded a woman could hardly 'murder with a wish,' and

having no other weapons than her natural ones of tongue and thought, she planned out a series of ingenious persecutions against her daughter till she should have induced her to marry.

‘My dear Violot, oblige me with a few minutes’ conversation,’ said my lady, one morning.

Violet looked up and followed her passively; her manner was as soft and gentle as of old—even gentler still to those about her—but the chill of her great grief was upon her, and her mother’s persistence had taught her a somewhat haughty reserve quite foreign to her nature, in defence not only of herself, but of the allegiance, which she never attempted to conceal, that she gave to him as faithfully as though he had been her husband.

‘My dear Violet,’ began the Viscountess, seating herself opposite to her daughter in her own room, ‘may I ask whether you absolutely intend dedicating all your days to Vivian Sabretasche? Do you really mean to devote yourself to maidenhood all your life because one man happens not to be able to marry you?’

The colour rose on Violet’s brow; the sensitive wound shrank at any touch; and my Lady Molyneux, religious and gentle woman though she was, could use Belgravian Billingsgate on occasion.

‘Why do you renew that subject? You know as well as I, that I shall never marry. It is a subject which concerns no one but myself, and I have told you, once for all, that I hold myself as fully bound to him as if the vows we hoped to take had passed between us?’

Her voice trembled as she spoke, though her teeth were set together. The Viscountess sighed and sneered.

‘Then do you mean that you will refuse Regalia?’

‘I have refused him.’

‘You have!’ And my lady, with a smile, drank a little eau-de-Cologne by way of refreshment after hearing such a statement. ‘I suppose you know, Violet, that you will have no money; that if you do not make a good match now you are young and pretty, nobody will take you when you are the dowerless *passée* daughter of a penniless Irish Peer? And Vallenstein-Seidlitz, may I inquire if you have refused *him*, too?’

‘He has not given me the opportunity; if he do, I shall.’

‘If he do, you will? You must be mad—absolutely mad!’ cried her mother, too horrified for expression. ‘Don’t you know that there is not a girl in the English, or the French empire,

who would not take such an offer as his, and accept it with thanksgiving?’

‘Oh yes? I could not sell myself to better advantage!’

‘Sell yourself?’ repeated the peeress. Fine ladies are not often fond of hearing things called by their proper names.

‘Yes, sell myself,’ repeated Violet, bitterly, leaning against the mantelpiece, with a painful smile upon her lips. ‘Would you not put me up to auction, knock me down to the highest bidder? Marriage is the mart, mothers the auctioneers, and he who bids the highest wins. Women are like racers, brought up only to run for Cups, and win handicaps for their owners.’

‘Nonsense?’ said her mother, impatiently. ‘You have lost your senses, I think. There is no question of “selling,” as you term it. Marriage is a social compact, of course, where alliances suitable in position, birth, and wealth, are studied. Why should you pretend to be wiser than all the rest of the world? Most amiable and excellent women have married without thinking love a necessary ingredient. Why should you object to a good alliance if it be a *mariage de convenance*?’

‘Because I consider a *mariage de convenance* the most gross of all social falsehood! You

prostitute the most sacred vows and outrage the closest ties; you carry a lie to your husband's heart and home. You marry him for his money or his rank, and simulate an attachment for him that you know to be hypocrisy. You stand before God's altar with an untruth upon your lips, and either share an unhallowed barter, or deceive and trick an affection that loves and honours you. The Quadroon girl sold in the slave-market is not so utterly polluted, as the woman free, educated, and enlightened, who barter herself for a "marriage for position!"

Something of her old passionate eloquence was roused in her, as she spoke with contempt and bitterness. Her heart was sick of the follies and conventionalities which surrounded her, so meshing her in that it needed both spirit and endurance to keep free and true amidst them all. Lady Molyneux was silent for a minute, possibly in astonishment at this novel view of that usual desideratum—a marriage for position.

'My dear Violet, your views are very singular—very extraordinary. You are much too free of thought. If you had listened to me once before, you would never have had the misery of your present unhappy infatuation. The eye of society is upon you; you must act with dignity; society

demands it of you. You must not disgrace your family by pining after a married man. It was very sad, I know—very sad that affair; and I dare say you were very attached to him. Everybody knows he was a most handsome, gifted, fascinating creature, though, alas! utterly unprincipled. Still, I think your first feeling should have been one of intense thankfulness at being preserved from the fate you might have had. Only fancy if his wife had not declared her claims before your marriage with him! Only fancy, what your position in society would have been! Every one would have pitied you, of course, but not a creature could have visited you!’

The silent scorn in her daughter’s eyes made her pause; she could not but read the contempt of her own doctrines in them, which Violet felt too deeply to put into words.

‘I have no doubt it was a very great trial,’ she continued, hurriedly; ‘I am not denying that, of course; still, what I mean is, that your duty, your moral duty, Violet, was, as soon as you found that Vivian Sabretasche was the husband of another, to do your very utmost to forget him, certainly not to foster and cherish his memory as persistently and wilfully as you do. It is an entire twelvemonth since you parted from him, and yet,

instead of trying to banish all remembrance of your unhappy engagement and breaking entirely with him, you keep up a correspondence with him—more foolish your father to allow it!—and obstinately refuse to form a more fortunate attachment, and marry well. I tell you that your affection, however legitimate its commencement, became wrong, *morally wrong*, as soon as you learned that he was married to another woman.'

At last the Viscountess paused for breath; the scorn which had been gathering deeper and deeper in Violet's face burst into words; she lifted her head, that her mother might not see the thick blinding tears that gathered in her eyes:

'A sin? You cannot mean what you say! The sin, if you like, were indeed to forsake him and forget him; *that* were a crime, of which, if I were capable, you would indeed have reason to blush for me. When I know him, worthy of every sacrifice that any woman could make him, so true and generous that he chose misery for himself rather than falsehood towards me, am I then to turn round and say to him, "Because you cannot marry me—in other words, contribute to my own aggrandisement, and flatter my own self-love, I choose to forget all that has passed between us, to ignore all the fidelity I once vowed to you,

and sell whatever charms I have to some buyer free to bid a better price for them ? ”’

The satiric bitterness in her tone stung her mother into shame, or as faint an approach to it as she could feel, and, like most people, she covered an indefensible argument with vague irritation.

‘Really, Violet, your tone is highly unbecoming: I have absolutely no patience with your folly—!’

Violet stopped her with a gesture as of physical suffering, but with a dignity in her face that awed even her mother into silence.

‘Not even you shall ever apply such a term to any devotion I can show to him. He is worthy all the love of a woman far nobler and better than I ever shall be. I promised him my allegiance once when the world smiled upon our love; because the world now frowns instead, do you suppose that I shall withdraw it? Do not torture me any more with this cruel discussion; it is ended once for all. I shall *never* marry; it will always be as useless to urge me as it is useless now. God knows whether we may ever meet again; but, living or dead, I am for ever bound to him.’

Every vestige of colour fled from her face as she spoke; her fingers were clasped together till

her rings cut into the skin; and there was that in her voice, which might have touched into sympathy, even the coldest nature. But (I do not think one can blame my Lady Molyneux; if she was born without feelings, perhaps she was hardly more responsible for the non-possession of them, than the idiot for the total absence of brain) her mother was not even silenced.

‘Is that your final decision?’ she said, with a sneer. ‘Very well, then! I will tell Vallenstein that my daughter intends to lead a semi-conventual life, with the celibacy, but not the holy purpose, of a nun, because she is dying for a handsome *roué* who happens to be a married man. I dare say he will enjoy telling the story at the Tuileries; and there are plenty of women, my love, who will like nothing better than a laugh against *you*.’

‘You can say what you please,’ answered Violet, between her teeth.

But that she was her mother, the Viscountess would have had a far sharper retort.

‘Of course I can? And stories grow strangely in passing from mouth to mouth! Dear me, is it three o’clock? And I was to be at Notre-Dame by half-past, to hear that divine creature, Alexis Dupont!’ And my lady floated from the room,

while her daughter leant her head upon the mantelpiece, the tears she had forced back while in her mother's presence falling hot and thick on the chill marble—not more chill than the natures that surrounded her in the gay world of which she was weary. Her heart was sick within her, the burden of her life grew heavier than she knew how to bear :

‘Vivian, Vivian, why did you forsake me? *Any* fate were better than this—any fate, any fate! Would to God that I could die with you!’ burst from her lips, while the form that Vallenstein coveted shook with uncontrollable sobs.

How long she stood there she did not know, till hands as soft as her own touched hers, a face as fair as her own was lifted to hers, a voice whispered, ‘Why are you in pain? For you, of all, life should be bright and beautiful!’

Violet Molyneux stooped and touched with her lips the brow that had once flushed beneath De Vigne's caresses.

‘Alma, tell me, what do *you* call fidelity?’

‘Fidelity?’ repeated Alma, with that instantaneous flash of responsive feeling on her mobile features which it had been De Vigne's pleasure to summon up and watch at his will. ‘There is little of it in the world, I fancy. A marriage is

to me null and void without fidelity, not only of act, but of thought, of mind, of heart; and fidelity makes in God's sight a marriage tie holier than any man can forge, and one which no human laws can sever. What do I call fidelity? I think it is to keep faithful through good report and evil report, through suffering, and, if need be, through shame; it is to credit no evil of the one loved from other lips, and if told that such evil is true by his own, to blot it out as though it never had been; to keep true to him through all appearance, however against him, through silence, and absence, and trial; never to forsake him even by one thought, and to brave all the world to serve him; that is what seems fidelity to me,—nothing less—nothing less!

Her eyes flashed, her lips quivered. A tender love, an undying sorrow, were spoken on her face, as, turned full to Violet the sunlight fell upon it.

Violet looked at her and sighed; she was too unselfish not to regret, even amidst her own sorrow, that another should share a similar fate; and she felt little doubt either that De Vigne cared nothing for his former protégée, or that he had left her, with his love spoken but his marriage told. She liked the depth of feeling and delicacy of nature which had made Alma hold her

attachment to him too sacredly to speak of it, and hear his name, when it was occasionally mentioned in the Molyneux circle, without betraying ‘the secret wound beneath the cloak,’ loving the hand that had given that wound too well to murmur to others at its pain. The similarity of their fate touched her. She stooped over Alma and passed her hand over the golden hair that De Vigne had drawn through his fingers—those shining silken threads that had held him closer than chains of iron.

‘You are right! We must give “nothing less.”’

This was all that passed between them, then or afterwards on what lay nearest to the hearts of both, yet that little was enough to awake a close sympathy between them, none the less real because it was silent. To Alma life was very bitter now. Twelve months had passed, and she was still as far from De Vigne as when she lay chained to her sick-bed. The letter she had written at Montessor’s had miscarried; De Vigne had never had it. Hearing nothing from him, she had written again—a letter which would have touched a heart far harder and more steeled against her than his. That letter she received back, sealed again, and directed to her in a writing which she knew but too well, firmly, boldly, with

not a trace allowed to appear in the clear caligraphy of the agony in which the words were penned. She knew *then* that he believed her false to him; that the circumstantial evidence which had told so strongly against her had crushed out all faith and trust and tenderness in his heart towards her. It was the most cruel wound Alma had ever had, to find herself so readily doubted, so harshly given up, so unjustly denied even a hearing. Injustice was always very bitter to her; it roused all that was dark and fiery in her character. From anybody else she would never have forgotten or pardoned it; certainly never have stooped to clear herself from it. De Vigne she forgave, and thought less of her own wrong than of all she knew that he endured.

Alma, with all her impulsiveness and expansiveness, was sensitive to all touch of those more delicate mimosas that she sheltered in her heart; over them she was haughty, proud, reserved. She had, moreover, great self-control. De Vigne's name was too dear to her to be breathed before others. She had resided twelve months with the Molyneux; and they never knew, though he was often mentioned casually, that his name merely spoken by another's voice struck like steel to her heart.

Alma's principles of honour and of trust were far more acute and refined than those of most people; the love De Vigne had lavished on her was sacred to her; a treasure reposed in her alone, not to be spread out before other eyes. Violet, the only one who would have translated the dilated terror of her eyes when the morning papers came in, the anguish of her face when she bent over the Returns of killed and wounded, the gleam of her eyes whenever De Vigne's name was mentioned by any man who had come back from the Crimea from ill-health or to bring despatches, — Violet was too absorbed in her own thoughts to notice what passed beside her, or at least to reflect upon it. She was kind to her, as she would have been to any one in a subordinate situation; still more so one, to whom she had always had a certain attraction, ever since she had heard of her as the artist of the Louis Dix-Sept. But, until the moment when Alma's definition of fidelity unwittingly betrayed her, Violet had noticed her but little, and never discovered her secret.

It was a peculiar position that Alma occupied in the Molyneux household in Paris. The Hon. Rushbrooke, admiring her *chevelure dorée*, had thought he could make much the same love to her

as to his mother's maid, whenever that soubrette chanced to be a pretty one ; and Lady Molyneux had scarcely ever spoken to her, save when, struck with her great taste in dress, she would fain have had her turned into a sort of *chef de toilette*. But Jockey Jack vowed she was as much of a lady as any of them ; swore he'd known Tressillian in early days ; by George, he *would* have them civil to the little girl, and was civil to her himself, in his bluff, blunt, kindly-meant way ; and Violet, won towards her as months passed on, sought refuge in her society from the inanities, frivolities, scandals, and manœuvres constantly poured into her ears by her mother, and from the whirl of a circle whose gaieties were now so foreign to her, until a tacit sympathy and a sincere regard grew up between them—the friendless artiste and the fashionable aristocrate.

## CHAPTER V.

## THE TORTURES OF TANTALUS.

It was Christmas night—Christmas-eve—and the midnight mass was rising and falling in its solemn chant through the long aisles of Notre Dame. The incense floated upwards to the dim vaulted roof, the starry lights glittered on the gorgeous high altar, while the sweet swell of the cathedral choir rose on the still, hushed air, as through Paris, under the winter stars, there tolled one by one the twelve strokes of the midnight hour.

Midnight mass in Notre Dame!—it were hard to hear it bursting in its glorious harmony, after the dead silence of the assembled multitude, once from priest and people, choir and altar, without something of that sadness and that veneration which lie in most of us, though too often lost and silenced in the fret and hurry of our life.

One by one the midnight strokes tolled slowly out upon the Christmas air; hushed as though no human heart beat amongst them, the gathered

thousands knelt in prayer; the last stroke fell and lingered on their ears, and then, over their bowed heads, rolled the rich cadence of the choir and the full swell of the organ-notes. Among the multitude knelt Violet Molyneux and Alma, their thoughts far from creeds or formularies, from religious differences or religious credulities, but their hearts bowed in prayer for those far distant. What was to them church, place, creed? thus they prayed in the solitude of their own chambers; thus they would have prayed beside the sick-beds of Scutari; thus they now prayed in the hushed aisles of Notre Dame, where, if forms differed, human hearts at least beat beside them and around, with hopes, fears, griefs, passions, pleading for mercy, as in theirs!

As they passed out of the great door to the carriage, in the frosty starlit night, both started, as a voice whispered by their side:

*‘Per Carita! date la limosina per amor del Figlio di Dio!’*

They scarcely saw the beggar’s face, coming out of the gas glare into the moonlit night, but they heard the voice, broken, almost fierce—perhaps with hunger!—in its supplication, and both instinctively, and contrary to the custom of either, stretched out their hands with an alms on Christ-

mas-eve. As it chanced, Alma was the nearer to the suppliant, who caught her offered gift, but did not see Violet's. The crowd following, pushed them on ; and their carriage rolled away, while the woman, with Alma's coin in her hand, looked after them with a strange expression on her haggard face, partly curiosity, partly hate, partly fear, yet with a tinge of regret and pain, as she muttered, in Tuscan :

*‘ Santa Maria ! questo sorriso mi fa pensare di gli ! E presagio della morte—ma—per chi ? ’*

The wild gaze of the Italian's fierce dark eyes, the haunting tone of that shrill ‘ Carita ! Carita ! ’ still lingered in Alma's mind as she rolled through the gay gas-lighted streets of Paris ; and her young eyes closed, with a despairing sigh, and a sickening shudder of dread, at this mysterious Human Life, which is so short in years, so long in suffering.

The Paris winter passed ; passed as Paris winters ever do, with a gay whirl of glittering life for the rich, with cold, and hunger, and suffering for the poor ; the gas flowers of Mabile, burning at the same hour, with the candle that gleamed its sickly light on the dead bodies at the Morgue. The Paris winter passed, and Violet Molyneux was still the belle of its soirées ; that chill hauteur which

in self-defence she had assumed, was no barrier between her and the love that was pressed upon her from all quarters and highest ranks, evident though it was by her equable coldness to all, that her exquisite loveliness would never be given to any. In February, Lord Molyneux received a letter with the stately royal seal of the Vallenstein-Seidlitz, requesting the honour of his daughter's hand. It came to him when they were at dinner; even with the length of the table between them, his wife knew, or thought she knew, the armorial bearings of the seal, as it lay upwards unopened, and congratulated herself, though with a rapid cast forwards as to how many hundreds the trousseau would cost; but the trousseau would be one final expense, and Violet's dress in the present state of things, was an annual destruction of what without her my lady would have had for her own silks and laces, jewellery and point. As they took their coffee, preparatory to going to a ball at the British Embassy, Jockey Jack broke the seal, perused the missive, and in silence handed it to his daughter. Violet read it, with pain, for she foresaw that she should not be allowed to reject this, as she had done others, without contention and upbraiding; and gave it back to him as silently, but the thin, jewelled

hand of her mother intercepted it, with a snappish sneer :

‘Is your own wife, Lord Molyneux, to be excluded from all your confidences with your daughter?’

‘What answer, Vy?’ asked Jockey Jack, turning a deaf ear to his lady, who had a knack of bringing forward her relationship to him on any disagreeable occasion, such as opening his notes or referring her creditors to him, but on all others ignored it very completely.

‘The same as usual, papa,’ answered Violet, bending down to him.

Lady Molyneux read Vallenstein’s formal and courtly letter with calm deliberation through her gold eye-glass; and Alma rose and left the room, guessing, with intuitive tact and delicacy of perception, that this was some matter which they would prefer to discuss alone. Lady Molyneux read the letter, then folded it up and put it in its envelope.

‘Violet, would it be too much for me to ask to be allowed to share the confidence you gave your papa just now? Might I inquire what reply you send to Vallenstein?’

Violet gave one sigh of inexpressible weariness; she was so tired of this ceaseless contention, the

continual dropping of water on a stone; this jangling and upbraiding; the martyrdom of daily petty badgering and polished vituperation.

‘Certainly you may, mamma. I thank Prince Carl for the honour he has done me; and I reject his offer with all the gratitude for his generosity that it merits.’

Lady Molyneux shrugged her shoulders, and did not condescend to answer her. She turned to her husband, who was beating an impatient tattoo on the back of his couch.

‘My dear Molyneux, do *you* intend, too, to refuse Prince Carl’s proposals?’

Jockey Jack looked up with a curse on women’s tongues, and on their tomfoolery of marriage and giving in marriage, ready to dissent from his wife at a moment’s notice.

‘Vallenstein does not propose for *me*, my dear. I have nothing to do with it, except to tell him, as decently as I can, that Vy is very much obliged to him, but would rather be excused.’

‘Then you mean to countenance her in her folly?’

‘I don’t know what you mean by countenancing her; she is old enough to judge for herself, especially about her own husband. I dare say a royal marriage would have had great attractions for

you, Helena, but if your daughter thinks differently there is no reason for you to quarrel about it,’ said Jockey Jack, who did not see why one man was not as good as another to Violet, nor yet, if they were not, why she should be bullied about it.

‘I see one if you do not,’ said his wife, frigidly. ‘It is of the greatest importance that she should marry soon and marry well. The singularly unfortunate circumstances that attended her lamentable engagement—an engagement that would never have been entered into if I had been listened to—have laid her open to a great deal of remark, never beneficial to any woman—’

‘Do you speak feelingly?’ interrupted Lord Molyneux, *sotto voce*.

‘Indeed, very prejudicial,’ continued his wife, imperturbably. ‘Violet has now been out three years; girls that were débutantes with her have settled well long ago. Beatrice Carteret, with not a tithe of her advantages, married the Duke of St. Orme in her first season: and that remarkably ordinary little Selina Albany drew Whitebait into a proposal, and he settled a hundred thousand upon her for pin-money—’

‘That’ll do, that’ll do,’ cut in Molyneux, impatiently. ‘St. Orme is an old brute, who

bullied his first wife into consumption, and as for Whitebait, he's a young fool, whom his uncle tried to get shut up for idiocy; if Vy can't do better than that, I would rather she lived and died a Molyneux. If you've no better arguments for marriage, Helena—'

'At all events,' said my lady, with her nastiest sneer, 'they would either of them make as good husbands as your favourite would have done with a wife *in petto*! She has been immensely admired; she has made more conquests, I have no doubt, than any woman of her years; but men will not go and recount their own rejections; other ladies will not believe me when I tell them whom she might have married—very naturally, too—and all the world knows of her is her devotion to a married man! I leave it to her own sense to determine, whether that is a very advantageous report to cling to her in circles, where women dislike her as their rival, and men whom she has rejected are not very likely to be over-merciful in their terms of speaking of her. Of course it is all hushed when I draw near, but I have overheard more than one remark very detrimental to her. In a little time men will become very shy of making one their wife, whose name has been so long in connection with a married man's, and whose

ridiculous *dévouement* to Colonel Sabretasche has been the most amusing theme in salons where he has been so famous for love not quite so constant! Therefore, I say, it is most important she should marry soon, and marry well; and to reject such proposals as Prince Carl's would be madness—a man who could wed, if he chose, with one of the royal houses of Europe! A letter of refusal shall never be sent to Vallen-tein'

'Ah! well, I'm sure I don't know,' said poor Jockey Jack, bewildered with this lengthened lecture. 'Come, Vy, your mamma speaks reasonably—for once! You know I am very much attached to Sabretasche—very much—and I admit you don't see any other man so handsome or so accomplished, and all that sort of thing; and he was deuced mad about you, poor fellow! But then, you see, as long as there's that confounded wife of his in the way, and her life's just as good as his, he can't marry you, with our devilish laws; and, ten to one if ever the time come that he can, he won't care a straw about you—that's very much the way with us men—and you'll have wasted all your youth and your beauty for nothing, my poor pet! You see, we are not rich, and if you were well married—it's most women's

ambition, at the least! Come, Vy, what do you say?’

Violet rose and leaned against the console, with her head erect, her little pearly teeth set tight, her lips closed in a haughty, scornful curve over them, her face very pale—pale, but resolute as Eponina’s or Gertrude von der Wart’s—and I think the martyrdom of endurance is worse than the martyrdom of action!

‘I say what I am weary of saying—that it is useless, and will ever be useless, to urge me to the sin of infidelity, which you raise into a virtue because it is expedient! Let me alone!—it is all I ask. I go into society because you desire it; it is hard that you will persecute me on the one subject which is the most painful of all. Let me alone!—what I may suffer, I never intrude upon you. If you wish to be free from me—if I cost you anything you grudge—only allow me to work for myself—to go into the world, where for your sake I am not known, and, under another name, gain money for myself; I have often been told my voice would bring me more wealth than I should need. Only give me permission, I will never complain; but consent to be given over to Vollenstein, or any other man, I will not! To be sold by you to the highest

bidder—to be forced into a union I should loathe—to be compelled to a marriage that would be infidelity to both! I know what you mean: an unwedded daughter is an expense, and, as society counts, somewhat a discredit. If you feel it so, I am willing to support myself; if you allowed it, I should find no shame in that; but, once for all, I *swear*, that unless God will that I should ever marry him whom I love and honour, I will be no man's wife. If you care nothing for my peace, if you will not listen to my prayers, if you will not pity me in my trial—at least, you will not seek to make me break my oath!’

Jockey Jack rose from his seat, and left the room; he felt it was his duty to upbraid her for her folly; but he had not the heart to do it, and true Briton!—left the room, ashamed of the emotion which showed that all good and generous things were not wholly dead within him.

At the ball at the English Embassy that night all beauty paled before hers; men looking on it would have given ten years of their lives to win one smile from those lovely eyes, to have made one blush glow on that pure, colourless cheek; young, unnoticed *débutantes* looked at her as she passed them, with that crowd gathered round her which everywhere lingered on her steps,

and wished, with all the envy of women and all the fervour of their years, that they were she—the belle of Paris—in whose praise there was not one dissentient voice, in whom the most fastidious and hypercritical could not find a flaw. If they had seen the reverse picture, the Queen of Society without that crown which was so weary a weight upon her aching brows—if they had seen her that night, the flowers off her luxuriant hair, the glittering jewels off her arms, kneeling there by her bedside in solitude, which no human eyes profaned, they would have paused before they envied Violet Molyneux, courted, followed, worshipped though she was. If the world went home with most of us, I fear it would have sadder stories to tell than the *cancans* and the *grivois* tales in which its heart delights; the lips that sing our gayest barcarolles in society, often have barely strength enough to murmur a broken prayer in the solitude of their lonely hours, when the mask is off and the green curtain is down!

It was the beginning of April; the chesnuts of the Tuileries were just thrusting out their first green buds, bringing to Alma's thoughts those chesnut-boughs at her old nurse's home, under whose leafy shadows in the sunshine of two summers past she had drunk of that fatal intoxica-

tion, whose delirium is more rapturous, and whose awakening more bitter, than the dreams of the opium-eater. Meanwhile for one end she had worked unwearyingly. Greatly to her mother's annoyance, Violet had introduced her talent into notice among the dilettanti of Paris. Many were ready to admire anything that would win them favour with the English beauty; others really saw, and were struck with, the wonderful dash and vitality in the outlines, the delicacy and brilliance of the colouring; orders in plenty were given her, more than she could have completed in a dozen years, and Alma excluded herself from the society into which her own genius and Violet's patronage would have introduced her, that she might work, with her art and her hands, and her rich glowing imagination, till she had money to take her to the Crimea to win him back, or die. Poor child! how few ‘win back’ all that makes their life's glory, whatever stake it be; yet we live—live to the full age of human life. When we woo death he comes not; when we bar the chamber-door, then he enters with his chill breath and stealthy step.

Her hoard was completed. Never did miser gaze on his treasure, never wife on her husband's ransom, never captive on the warrant of

his freedom, never author on the darlings of his brain, with fonder rapture, with more grateful joy, than Alma on the money won by her own hands, which was to bear her to her lover. The thousand miles seemed now but as a span; love would cross all the lands, bridge all the seas, that parted her from him! She would go to him, she would find him; she would risk all to see him once again, to kneel at his feet, to swear to him she was his, and his alone; to force him to believe her!

Alma looked at her precious gold that was to take her to his side, that was to bring him back to her; gold won by the head and hand for the service of the heart, that was chained down, its high thoughts clogged, its beating wings fettered, its spirit bruised, but never beaten, by the curse of—want of money. It was won; the modern god without whose aid human life may struggle and fall and rise again, and again struggle and again fall, and go down at the last in the unequal fight of right against might, talent against wealth, honesty against expediency, for all the world may care. It was won; and not an hour longer should any human force keep her from that distant goal whither for twenty weary months her heart had turned so constantly. She locked her money in a

secret drawer (she—generous as the winds—had grown as careful of that treasure as any hoarding Dives!), and left her room to seek Violet Molyneux, and tell her she must leave her. It was impossible for her not to be grateful to Violet for the generous delicacy, the tact, the kindness with which she smoothed away all that her mother would have made painful in the position of any employée; and Violet grew fond of her, as all who knew the Little Tressillian were wont to do, even despite themselves, won by her winning, impulsive, graceful ‘ways,’—natural to her as its songs to a bird, its vivacity to a kitten, its play in the evening wind to a flower.

She sat down in the inner drawing-room. She did not see Violet, and supposed her to be in her own boudoir, where the belle of Paris spent each day until two, denied to all, often in penning those letters, which were her lover’s only solace through the long Crimean nights.

Suddenly, however, she heard Rushbrooke Molyneux’s voice in the outer room; she did not like him, and he called her, like Vane Castleton, a ‘little devil,’ because, when he had tried to make such love to her as he thought her position in his family warranted, Alma’s hauteur to him and the keen satire with which the little lady

knew how to take care of herself very well, and to hit hard where she did not admire the style of attention paid to her, had annoyed the attaché exceedingly, and irremediably wounded his amour propre.

‘Vy, am I a good shot?’ he was saying.

‘You know you are,’ answered his sister’s voice; she was probably surprised at so irrelevant a question.

‘Very well; then if you won’t marry Vallenstein—the Dashers, you see, are coming home, and as soon as Colonel Sabretasche is in England I shall challenge him, he will meet me, and I shall shoot him here—just here, Vy—where life ceases instantaneously.’

A low cry of horror burst from his sister’s lips. Alma involuntarily rose and looked into the room; she saw that Violet had started from her brother’s side, her face blanched with amazement, and her eyes fastened on him with the fascination and the loathing with which a bird gazes up into a snake’s green fiery eyes.

‘Rushbrooke! Great Heaven! you would stain your hand with murder?’

‘Murder! What an idea! Duelling is legitimate, *ma sœur*, in this country at least; and I dare say your lover will find his way to Paris, though.

he is such a “man of honour.” Listen to me, Vy; seriously, you must be mad to be taking the veil, as it were, for a fellow who can’t marry you—for the best of all reasons, that he is another woman’s husband. It’s the greatest tomfoolery one ever heard. Why shouldn’t you do like any other girl—send this bosh of romance to the deuce and settle well. Any woman going would be wild to have a chance of winning Vollenstein. He’s an out-and-out better match than we could have looked for; and he’ll be very facile, Violet; he will be an easy husband after a little time, and you can invite Sabretasche to your Court—’

‘God help me! if my brother tempt me to double dishonour!’

The words broke from her almost unconsciously. She deigned no answer to him, but stood looking at him with such loathing and contempt, that Rushbrooke Molyneux, though he was far gone in shamelessness, shrank before it.

But like many such natures, coward at heart, he could bully a woman.

‘Well, will you marry Prince Carl, or not?’

‘I have told you once for all—*no*.’

Violet stood, her head just turned over her shoulder to him as she was about to leave the room; her calm, resolute, contemptuous tone

stung him into irritation ; and Rushbrooke had set his heart on his sister's becoming Vallenstein's wife, for certain pecuniary reasons of his own, having lost very heavily to the Prince at the French Derby, and over Baccarat.

‘You are quite determined? Then I shoot Sabretasche dead four-and-twenty hours after I see him next. Come, Vy, choose: the wedding-ring for yourself, or the grave for your lover?’

He meant what he said—for the time at least ; and Violet knew he was quite capable of doing all he said, and more, if he threatened it. Her love subdued her pride ; in the frenzy of the moment she turned back and caught both her brother's hands :

‘Rushbrooke! are you utterly merciless—utterly brutal? Not to save my own life would I kneel to you ; but to save his I would stoop lower, were it possible! I know that he would choose murder from you, rather than infidelity from me. If you take his life, you take mine ; my existence is bound with his—you will scarcely brand yourself a fratricide?’

‘Splendid acting, Vy, said her brother, coldly. You always did act well, though ; you played in the Belvoir theatricals when you were only ten, I remember. Come, think better of it ; marry

Vallenstein, and your idol is safe from me. If you boast your love is so great, you might surely save the man's life?’

‘God help me!’ moaned Violet.

‘Will you marry Prince Carl?’

‘No!’

‘You will “murder” Vivian Sabretasche then, as you term it?’

Another cry burst from Violet's lips, forced out as from a woman on the rack of the Star Chamber or the Inquisition. Then she lifted her eyes to him, with deep dark circles under them, her face full of unutterable anguish, but with a strange nobility upon it.

‘I would rather leave him in God's hands than yours. HE will protect him from you! I have told you, I will never break my faith to him!’

‘Very well! I will go and have a look at my pistols,’ smiled her brother, as he rose.

But Violet's courage gave way, she fell heavily forwards on a couch.

‘My beloved! my beloved! God knows I would give my life for yours, but they shall never make me false to you! You would not wish it—you would not wish it, darling,—not to save your life—’

Alma could stay no longer ; with one bound, like a young panther, she was in the room and kneeling beside Violet, while she turned her beaming, flashing eyes, full of their azure fire, upon Violet's brother.

‘She gave you your right title. Fratricide ! You are more than that, you are a brute, and were I of your own sex, I would make you feel it, boasted duellist, or rather murderer, though you be. What is your sister's marriage to you, that you should seek to force her into a union that she loathes ? Prince Carl himself would cry shame on you. Go, go, and never come near your sister till you come to ask her pardon for your inhuman words and dastard act.’

With all her old passion, Alma spoke, like a little Pythoness in her wrath ; every one of her words brought a flush of shame to his cheek, and he forgot that it was his mother's dependent whom he should have cowed with a word and threatened with dismissal.

He left the room, murmuring something of Vollenstein, his friend — devotedly attached — Violet's unfortunate attachment — only meant to frighten her, of course — nothing more — nothing more. Then he backed out ; and Violet lifted her face with a painful tremulousness on the lips.

‘Alma, I have not forgotten your definition of fidelity!’

The smile with which she spoke struck to her listener’s heart; and she looked up at her with an answering regard, that seemed to Violet like an angel promise, and prophecy, for the future:

‘To those who are thus faithful reward will come!’

Violet tried to smile again, but her lips quivered in the effort, and she rose and left the room; while Alma, seizing the paper that Rushbrooke had flung down, tore it apart with breathless haste, remembering his words, ‘The Dashers are coming home.’

De Vigne had been much altered since Curly’s death. Curly’s words had let in one ray of hope, and he cursed the headlong impetuosity which had made him send her letter back unopened. There was hope, and sometimes De Vigne strove with all his force to shut it out, lest it should break in and fool him once again; at others he clung to it as men do to the only chance that makes their life of value. Heaven knows that if his love for Alma had been error, it brought him punishment enough. Whichever way it turned, he saw enough to madden him. If she were false to him, his life would be one long and bitter curse; if he had judged

her too harshly, and his neglect and cruelty had driven her to desperation, and sent her, young, unprotected, attractive as she was to men, into the chill world to battle with poverty, he shuddered to think what might have been her fate, so delicate, so trusting, so easily misunderstood; if she were true to him, across the heaven that opened to him with that hope, there stretched the dark memory of the woman who bore his name.

His love for her had changed as near to hate as his nature, generous and inherently forgiving, would allow. He had loved her, but with the love that slew Desdemona, that murdered Mariamne; a love that would have perilled all for one caress of hers, but would have sent her to her grave rather than have seen a rival's hand touch her, another's lips come near her; a love inexorable as death, that must have all, or nothing.

But in those long winter nights, tossing on his camp bed, Curly's words, like voices from the grave, recurred ceaselessly to him, and as a burst of tears—anguish in itself—yet relieves the still worse suffering of the brain, so gentler thoughts of Alma, a ray of hope, a gleam of trust, softened and relieved the bitter despair and hopeless agony of the past months. Was his own past so pure, his own life so perfect, that he had any right

to cast a stone at her, even though her error and her perfidy had blasted all his peace? De Vigne remembered, with a pang, how Sabretasche had said to him, ‘Let him that standeth take heed lest he fall,’ and how he had retorted, in the pride of his unassailed strength, that to win a young girl’s love, bound and fettered as he was, would be a blackguard’s act; yet his honour had gone down before his passion, and he had forgotten the ties that bound him, until, had she been true to him, it would have been useless to remember them.

If she had been false to him, if she had been Vane Castleton’s toy for the hour and the plaything of others since, he would try to find her, save her, shield her from her fate, even though to find her, and to leave her so, broke his own heart. If she had been true to him, and others had wronged her youth and her guilelessness, he would drag her from their clutches; and no matter into what depths of misery she had sunk, he would raise her up, avenge her, and if ever his name became his own again, give it, with his love and honour, to her in the sight of men. Across the darker passions of his soul gleamed the Pity and the Pardon he had once had need to ask of her. His love grew gentler, nobler, tenderer; and he

thought, amidst the anguish of those still night-watches, ‘Who am I, to sit in judgment on her or any other?’

De Vigne at last had learnt a lesson that he had never learned before in all his life—he had learnt to love not only *for himself*, but more purely, more holily, more unselfishly.

But at Constantinople—he whom all the army called by his Indian sobriquet of the Charmed Life, whom shot and shell, death and danger, had alike spared; who had ridden unharmed out of the fatal mêlée before the guns of Balaklava, though the last to leave those doomed and death-haunted lines;—at Constantinople De Vigne was chained on a sick-bed by the bitterest of all our Crimean foes—the cholera. It was touch and go with him; his life was very nearly added to those ghastly Returns, which witnessed how much human life was lost out there by mismanagement and procrastination. Thank God, the strength of his constitution pulled him through at last, but the Dashers sailed for England without him. I got leave to stay with him. I would have been cashiered rather than leave him alone in the Scutari sick-wards in that pestilential place, which sounds so poetic and delicious with its long, lovely name, its Golden Horn, its glistening Bosphorus,

its gleaming minarets, its Leilas, its Dudus, its bulbuls, and its beauty ; but is, as all of us can witness, a very abomination for a sick man to dwell in, with its dirt, its fleas, its mosquitoes, its jabbering crowds chattering every lingo, its abominable little Turks with their eternal ‘Bono Johnny,’ and its air rife with disease, malaria, and filth.

Sabretasche offered willingly to stay too.

‘No, no ; go to England, Sabretasche,’ said De Vigne, signing the Colonel down towards him in one of his intervals of comparative ease. ‘Before long I hope to follow you, and you would do me much more service if you would—if you could—without bringing her name forward at all, learn something for me of—’

He stopped ; he could not speak her name without a sharp spasm as of severe physical pain.

Sabretasche bent his head till his lips were close to De Vigne’s ear ; it was the first time he had heard him allude to her throughout the campaign.

‘Of Alma Tressillian ?’ he said, softly.

De Vigne signed him assent, and a silent pressure of his hand was bond enough between them. If Sabretasche had been like some eminent Christians of my acquaintance, he might have taken the occasion to exalt his own superior fore-

foresight in prophesying the trouble that would be born from De Vigne's careless intimacy with the Little Tressillian; being nothing more than a 'bon camarade,' with a generous mind, a kind heart, and a gentleman's tact, he felt no temptation to do anything of the kind.

Some three weeks after Ours had got under weigh for England, I was sitting by De Vigne's couch reading to him from some of the periodicals my mother had sent me. It was Hamley of the Artillery's 'Lady Lee,' which ought to interest anybody if a novel ever can; but I doubt if De Vigne heard a word of it. He lay in one position; his head turned away from me, his eyes fixed on the light rosy eastern clouds, his right hand clenched hard upon the bed-clothes as though it would lift him perforce from that cruel inaction, as it had aided him so many times in life. I was glad that at that minute an old Indian comrade of his—come en route from Calcutta to England viâ Constantinople to have a look at the seat of war—was shown into his room; hoping that courtesy might rouse him more than Hamley's lively story had power to do.

The man was a major in the Cavalry (Queen's—ça va sans dire), of the name of De Vine—a resemblance near enough, I dare say, to justify

Mrs. Malaprop and Co. in thinking them brothers, and the *Heralds' Office* in making them out two branches of the same house.

He sat and chatted some time of their old Scinde reminiscences; heartily sorry to see De Vigne knocked down as he was, and congratulating him warmly on the honours he had won—honours for which, in truth, though, De Vigne cared very little, as long as he had had the delight of fighting well, and was thought to ‘have done his duty.’

At last the man rose to go, and had bidden us good-by, when he turned back:

‘I say, old fellow, I’ve forgotten the chief thing I came here to tell you. This letter of yours has been voyaging after me, sent from Calcutta to Delhi, and from Delhi to Rohilecunde, and God knows where, till it came to my hand about four months ago. I was just going to open it when I saw the *g* in the name, and the ‘Crimea,’ which the donkeys at the Post-office overlooked. You see your correspondent has put you Hussars, I suppose that led to the mistake. It’s a lady’s writing: I hope the delay’s been no damage to your fair friend, whoever she be. I dare say you have ’em by scores from a dozen different quarters, so this one has been no loss. By George! it’

seven o'clock, and I'm to dine at the embassy. Good night, old fellow ; I shall come and see you to-morrow.'

Scrawled over with the different postscripts and addresses, so that nothing of the original address was visible save the 'Major de Vigne,' Alma's writing was recognized by him ere it had left the other's hand ; almost before the door had closed he wrenched it open, and turning away from me, read the many close-written and tear-blotted pages that she had penned to him on her sick-bed at Montessor's. Knowing he would wish to read on unwitnessed, I left the room.

He did read on, and, when he had read all, bowing his head upon his hands, he wept like a woman. For in that hour of joy just won, for which his heart went up to God in trembling gratitude—between him, and the love that was his heritage and right as man, there stood the dark shadow, the relentless phantom of his Marriage. It is bitter, Heaven knows, to be alone in the Shadow of Death, with no ray of light to guide, no gleam of hope to aid us ; but even more bitter than this, is it to stand as he now stood, with the sudden gleam and radiance of a sunshine that he must never enjoy playing even at his very feet ;—to stand as he now stood, fettered

by irons that long ago his own hands had forged; held back by the Eumenides of his own headlong follies; divided from all he loved as by a great gulf, by the fell consequences of the Past; his own passions their own Nemesis.

Would you know the poison that stung him in the cup of his joy? It was this single passage; ‘She told me she was your wife, Granville!—*your wife!*—that coarse, loud-voiced, cruel-eyed woman! But that at the moment I hated her so bitterly for her assumption, I could have laughed in her face! I could not help telling her it was a pity she did not learn the semblance of a lady to support her in her rôle; for I hated her so much for daring, even in pretence, to take your name—to venture to claim *you*. If it was wrong, I could not help it: I love you so dearly that I could never bear even an imaginary rival. That woman your wife! Not even when she showed me some paper or other she said was a marriage certificate, did a thought of belief in her story—which would have been disbelief in you—cross my mind for a moment; and when I discovered Vane Castleton’s cruel plot, and saw so plainly how this woman must have been an emissary of his to try and wean me from you, I thanked God that I had never been disloyal to you even with a

thought. I trusted you too well ever to believe that you would have kept such a secret from me. I loved you too fondly to wrong you in your absence by want of that faith which it is your right to expect and mine to give !’

Those were the words that struck him more fiercely than any dagger’s thrust. This was the wound which that soft and childlike hand, that would have been itself cut off rather than have harmed him, gave him in the very words that vowed her love. This is what chained him, Tantalus-like, from the heaven long yearned for, now so near, but near only to mock his fetters, to elude his grasp.

He must stand before her and say, ‘Your faith was misplaced—that woman is my wife !’

## CHAPTER VI.

THE WIFE TO WHOM SABRETASCHE WAS BOUND.

THE first chesnut-leaves of the Tuileries were silvered in the moonlight, and the dark Seine wound under the gloomy bridges of the old town out under the wooded heights of St. Germain, where the oaks that had listened to the love of Louise de la Vallière, were thrusting out their earliest spring-buds. It was night, and the deep calm heavens bent above, as if in tenderness for the fair white City that lay in the valley of the Seine, like one of the gleaming lilies of its own exiled Bourbons. Around it, in the grand old chase of St. Cloud, in the forest aisles of Fontainebleau, among the silent terraces of Versailles and Neuilly, the night was calm, still, hushed to holy silence; whilst in the City of pleasures, of blood, of mirth, of death, of wit, of strife, in the City of Mirabeau and André Chénier, of Rivarol and St. Just, of Marie Antoinette and Théroigne de Méricourt, the night was full of jests, and

laughter, as the gas-flowers of Mabilie were lit, and the Imperial household thronged the palace of the Bourbons, and the crowds filled the Boulevards and the Cafés Chantants; the Chaumière and the Château des Fleurs, for Paris was awake, crowned with flowers, with laughter on her lips and sparkling in her eyes, gay as a young girl at her first ball—gay as she has ever been, even on the eve of her darkest tragedies, her most terrible hours.

The soft spring night came down on Paris. Before the cheval-glass in her luxurious bed-chamber, with jewels on her hair and in her bosom, stood the belle of its most aristocratic réunions, shuddering, even while her maid clasped the pearls upon her arm for a ball at Madame de La Vieillecour's, at the memory of those words from her brother's lips, which bade her choose between infidelity or death. At the window of her own room, looking up to the clear stars that seemed to rebuke from their calm and holy stillness, the gay and feverish fret of the human life below, Alma Tressillian gazed on the spring night, her eyes brilliant with the radiance of hope; he was coming home—her lover, her idol; what could await her now but a return of that joy once so rudely shivered from her grasp? Not very many yards off,

in her crowded and bizarre boudoir, where finery stood the stead of taste, and overloading passed for luxury, the Trefusis read the line in the English papers which announced the arrival of her husband's troop, and threw it with an oath to Lady Fantyre, that the Crimea had not rid her of his life, and left her mistress of the portion of his wealth that would have come to her—for the law would have recognized her rights as [his ‘wife,’ and she was in difficulties and in debt. Underneath the windows, that shone bright with the wax-lights of Violet's toilette-table, stood a woman, once as beautiful as she, but now haggard, tawdry, pitiful to look upon, begging of the passers-by for the coins which would procure her a draught of absinthe; that deadly tempter, that sure, slow, relentless murderer who, Jael-like, soothes us for the moment to drive the iron nail into our brain while we slumber, and whom, madman-like, we seek and crave and thirst for, though we know the end is death. Those four women—how unlike they were! Dissimilar as night and dawn; as fragrant roses and dank nightshade; as the two spirits that in fable and apologue hover over our path, the one to lead us to a Gehenna, the other to an Eden; dissimilar enough, God knows. Yet the same stars looked down on them, the same men had loved

them, and, in one chain of circumstances, Fate had bound and woven them together.

That same night Sabretasche arrived in Paris. Rumours had reached him of Violet's engagement to Prince Carl of Vallenstein-Seidlitz. Believe them for an instant he did not.

But the rumour of her projected union with Vallenstein struck him with a sudden and deadly chill; he realized for the first time the possibility that, one day, if he could not claim her, another might. He remembered women who had loved, perhaps, as fondly as she, who had gone to their husband's arms with hearts aching for another; and Sabretasche, despite his faith, trembled for the treasure of which another man might rob him any moment, and he have no right or power to avenge the theft! I suppose he *ought* to have rejoiced if Violet had been able to have found that happiness with some other which he was unable to give her. But Sabretasche was only mortal, as I have often told you, and before we can love quite so exquisitely, I fear we shall have to ostracize love altogether. He cares but little for his jewel, who sees it gleaming in his rival's crown and does not long to tear it from the hated brows and hide it in his bosom, where no other eyes, save his own, shall see its radiance.

Sabretasche went to Paris as soon as his men were landed at Portsmouth, to learn what truth or untruth there was in this report; to look—if unseen himself—once more upon her, before another’s right should claim the beauty once his won. He must see her, and if she told him she could, without regret or lingering pain, wed any other, he would not curse her nor reproach her, he would have no right to do so; but he would pray God to bless her, and then—leave her, and never look upon her face again.

It was eleven o’clock when Sabretasche, alone, drove from the Hôtel de Londres to the hotel where the Molyneux lived in the Champs Elysées.

His heart beat thick as he drew near the house in which she dwelt. A carriage stood before the entrance, the door was wide open, the hall was bright with its wax-lights, the servants were moving to and fro, and in the full glare of the light he beheld that face, which with the din of war and death around had never for an hour ceased to haunt him. There she stood, unconscious of the eyes whose gaze she often thought would have power to recall her from the tomb; a narrow band of gold and pearls clasping her wavy chesnut hair; her large eyes darker and more brilliant still from the shadow beneath their lids; about her all the grace.

and fascination of her surpassing loveliness; and as he looked on her, taking her fan from a servant, she crossed the pavement and entered the carriage, still unconscious that in the darkness of the night the life she held so dear was beating close to hers!

The carriage rolled down the Champs Elysées. Ere the door closed, Sabretasche went up to a servant, lounging against the portal to talk to a pretty *bouquetière* of his acquaintance.

‘*Où va t-on?*’ he asked, rapidly.

The man—Lord Molyneux’s own man—started as he recognized Sabretasche, whom he had known so well two years before.

‘*Pardon, monsieur! Milord et miladi et mademoiselle* are gone to Madame de La Vieillecour’s. May I dare express to monsieur my gladness at seeing him safely from the Crimea? Can I also offer monsieur?—’ began Alceste, hesitatingly, noticing the deadly whiteness of his face. The question roused him to his old refined hatred of notice or publicity, and with a hasty negative he turned, and drove back to the Hôtel de Londres. As he had driven from the Gare, he had met Léonce de La Vieillecour, the Duc’s son by an early marriage, who had bidden him go to see his handsome *belle mère* at her *bal masqué* that night,

to which Sabretasche had given a hasty negative. Now he drove to Vieillecour's rooms in the Chaussée d'Antin, and asked him to take him with him to the Duchess's ball. Léonce gladly assented, gave him a domino and a mask, and drove him to one of the most brilliant and amusing réunions of the season, for the most celebrated and beautiful women in Paris were there; and the mask gave it much of the zest, and the freedom of a *bal de l'opéra*—a *bal de l'opéra* where all the revellers had pure descents and stately escutcheons, though not, perhaps, much more stainless reputations than the fair maskers of more 'equivocal position,' who were treading the boards, and drinking the champagne, of the opera festivities.

Not desirous of recognition, Sabretasche persuaded Léonce to leave him, telling him he was tired, and would rather look on than join in the society around him. Vieillecour quitted him, and Sabretasche, the best-known man in Europe, the *bel esprit* whose wit was quoted and fashion followed, whose bow was a brevet of rank, was alone in that truest solitude, the solitude of a crowd. *Hors de vue hors d'esprit* is the motto of the great world, which buries its greatest hero in Westminster Abbey and its fairest beauty in Père la Chaise, then fills up their places, and thinks no more of

them in its ebb and its flow, from the day when the dust of their tombs fell on their coffin-plates !

He moved through the rooms, threading his way through those brilliant butterflies who toil so wearily on the treadmill of fashion. As yet he saw not the one he sought ; though now and then he heard from men as they passed by him praises of her beauty, praises which turned his blood to fire. Once, a man in a violet domino powdered with violets in gold passed him quickly ; jealousy quickened his senses, and, despite his mask, he recognized Carl of Vallenstein-Seidlitz, with whom in days gone by he had drunk Johannisberg, and played écarté, and smoked Havannahs under the linden-trees of his summer palace, little foreseeing that the day perhaps would come, when Vallenstein would rob him of the one, once promised as his wife.

He lost the Prince in the crowd ; and still nowhere could he find her, whom his eyes ached with longing to gaze upon again, and Léonce de La Vieillecour dragged him perforce to see the Duchess, to speak to Madame of the Crimea and of Curly.

Gwen Brandling and Madame de La Vieillecour must truly have been two different beings, that she could talk with scarce a tremor of that ter-

rible death-scene in the hospital of St. Paul—talk of it flirting her fan, and glancing through her mask with those magnificent eyes, while the dance-music rang out in her ears! Did she really think so little of her brother, of the fair child with his golden curls and his gleeful laugh, who had played with her under the shadow of the lime-trees in their old home, long years before, when the world and its prizes were no more to her, than the polished chesnuts lying at her feet, and no prophetic shadow foretold to him his dying hour in the horrors of Sebastopol? Did she really think no more of him, as she waltzed in that brilliant circle with the arms of a royal Prince around her? Had the ‘*belle position*’ she worshipped, so utterly chilled all remnants of Gwen Brandling out of Madame de La Vieillecour? God knows! I will not judge her. Because there are no tears seen in our eyes, it does not follow we are dead to grief.

The windows of the ball-room, that equalled in size and splendour the famous Galerie de Glaces, opened at the far end, on to a terrace overlooking the cool shadowy gardens of the hotel; and dropping the curtain of one of the windows behind him, Sabretasche stood a moment in the calm air. At the end of the terrace,

having evidently quitted the ball-room as he had done by one of the twelve windows that opened on the terrace, stood a woman and a man. With all his trust in her, Sabretasche's heart beat thick with jealousy, doubt, and hate, as he saw Violet; and beside her, bending towards her, the domino of Carl of Vallenstein, his mask in his hand, and on his impassive Teuton features an eagerness and a glow but very rarely wakened there.

Not for his life could Sabretasche have stirred a step from where he stood; fascinated, basilisk-like, he gazed upon the woman he loved, and the man, whom the world said was soon to win from her the title by which, but two years before, he had hoped to have called her. He stood and gazed upon them, upon the one, whom he would have cherished so fondly; and upon the spoiler, the rival, who had stolen from him all he valued upon earth. They were speaking in French, and some of their words came to him where he stood.

‘That is your last resolve?’

‘Yes,’ answered Violet; and at the sound of that sweet and musical voice, whose harmony had been so long silent to him, Sabretasche's veins thrilled with that strange ecstasy of delight which borders close on pain. ‘I am not ungrateful,

monsieur, for the honour you would do me; but to accept it would be a crime in me and a treason to you. I know—I grieve to know—that others may have misled you, and not replied to you at the first as I bid them, and I sought this opportunity to tell you frankly, and once for all, that I can never be your wife.’

‘Because you love another!’

Violet drew away from him with her haughtiest grace.

‘If I do, monsieur, such knowledge should surely have prevented your seeking me as you have now done. I should have thought you too proud to wish for an unwilling bride.’

‘But I love you so tenderly, mademoiselle; I would win you at every risk, and if you give me your hand, I will do my best to make your heart mine too—’

Violet put out her hand with an impatient deprecatory gesture.

‘It is impossible, monsieur! Do not urge me further. Leave me, I beg of you. I shall never marry. I should have hoped my friends had made you understand this; but since they misled you, there was but one open and honourable course for me to pursue—to tell you at once, myself, that, much as I thank you for the honour

you would do me, I can never be your wife, nor any other's. Your words only pain me; you are too true a gentleman to press me longer. Leave me, I entreat of you, sire.'

He was too true a gentleman to press her further; he bowed low, and left her; he would not honour her with another word of regret, though it cut him hard, for *he*, Carl of Vallenstein, who might have mated with almost any royal house in Europe!—to be rejected by the daughter of a poor Irish peer; and as his violet domino floated past, Sabretasche heard him mutter, under his blondes moustaches, '*Que le diable emporte ce peste d'homme marié !*'

He lifted the curtain of one of the windows, and went back into the brilliantly-lighted ball-room; and Sabretasche was at last alone with the woman he loved,

'Vivian—my husband!—I will be true to you. Truer than wife ever was!'

It was a stifled, heart-broken whisper that scarcely stirred the air, but it roused a tempest in the heart of the man who heard it. With yearning love he stretched out his arms, murmuring her name—that name which had been on his lips in so many dreams, broken by the din of hostile cannon. She turned, and, with a low,

faint cry, sprang forward, and fell upon his heart. That meeting was sacred; unseen by any eyes save those of the pale calm stars, which watch so much of this world's deepest grief and sweetest rapture. For awhile, in the joy of re-union, they forgot all save that they were together—save that he held her, with that heart beating against his which no man as yet had had power to win from him—save that he had come back to her from danger and suffering, out of the very shadow of the valley of death, from under the very stroke of the angel of destruction.

On such a meeting we will not dwell; there is little such joy on earth, and what there is, is sacred. As, after a dream of the night in which those we have lost live again, and the days long gone by bloom once more for us with all their sunshine and their fragrance, we awake in the gray dawn of the winter's morning, with all the sorrow and the burden, the darkness and the weariness, of our actual life rushing back upon us; so they awoke to the memory that they had met only to part again—that they had had an interval of rest, given them only like the accused in the torture-room, even that they might live to suffer the more.

They must part! If it be hard to part a living

member from a quivering human body, is it not harder to sever from each other two human hearts such as God formed to beat as one, and which are only torn asunder, at the cost of every quivering nerve, and every clinging fibre? Heaven knows, few enough hearts in this world beat in unison for those that do, to need be parted! And as the memory of their inexorable fate rose up before him, Sabretasche shuddered at the sight of that exquisite loveliness, condemned for his sake to a solitary and unblessed life, desolate as a widow, without even the title and the memories of a wife. Involuntarily he drew her closer to him—involuntarily he murmured :

‘ Oh, my God ! Violet, we cannot live thus ! ’

What comfort had she to give him ? None. She could only weep passionate tears, clinging to him and vowing she would be true to him always—true to him, whatever chanced.

‘ “ True to me ! ” God bless you ! And I have nothing to give you in return but suffering—I have nothing to reward you with, but anguish and trial ! If I could but bear your burden with mine ! If I could but suffer alone—’

‘ No, no,’ she murmured vaguely, ‘ not alone—not alone. What we suffer, let us suffer *together*. You would not have me cease to love you ? ’

‘My God! no. And yet, if I were not selfish, I should bid you forget me, and try to rejoice, if you obeyed. Violet, if ever you should’—and, despite all his effort, his voice was all but inaudible with the anguish and the tenderness he tried to hold down and rein in—‘if you should think at any time it were possible to find happiness with another—if you fancy you could in other loves forget my fatal passion, which has been only doomed to crowd your years with suffering—*be* happy; I will never reproach you. Do not think of what *I* shall suffer; no complaint of mine shall ever trouble you. I will try and thank God that he has not, through me, cursed the life dearer than my own, and in time, perhaps, I may learn to bless the one who has given you the joy I would have—’

He ceased; his voice was low and broken; he could not complete his generous speech; the great love in him overpowered every other feeling; he could not bid her wed another! Who amongst us would ask of any man to sign his own death-warrant? Who can wonder that Sabretasche shrank from consigning himself to a living death, to an existence hopeless as the grave, with throes of mortal agony that would never cease as long as there were blood in his veins, and vitality in his

heart? She looked up in his face, the moonlight gleaming in her eyes, in which was the smile of a love without hope, yet faithful to the end—such a smile as a woman might give from the scaffold, to one whom she would fain comfort to the last.

‘Do you remember, Vivian, when you first told me you loved me, I said I was yours—yours for life and death—yours for ever? That vow is as sacred to me as though it were my marriage oath to you. Love, happiness, home—and with another? You can know me little, my own dearest, to speak so to me? Others have tried to urge me to infidelity. I never thought *you* would insult me too. Noble, generous, unselfish as your love is, I, who thought once to be your wife—I will be worthy of it, and I count sorrow from your hand far dearer than joy from any other’s!’

Sabretasche could not answer her; he tried to thank her, he tried to bless her for her words, but his voice failed him. To have such love as this given him, and to be forced by fate to live as though he had it not!—to leave her as though she were nothing to him, when, only grown dearer by absence, to part from her was to wrench away his very life! They might have been so happy, if—in his early youth he had not wedded!

His burden grew heavier than he could bear; With her words dawned the ideal of so fair a life ! It rose up before his grasp with all its sweetest glories. The world—the world—what was that to them ? he had but to stretch out his hand, and say to the woman who loved him, ‘ Come !’

His burden grew heavier than he could bear. He became deathly pale ; his head was drooped till his lips rested on her hair ; he stood immovable, save for the fast thick throbs of his heart, and the convulsive strength with which he pressed her against his breast. The physical conflicts he had of late passed through, were peace, rest, child’s play, compared with this deadly struggle that waited for him in the first hour of his return !

Suddenly he lifted his head.

‘ I have no strength for this ! Let us go into the world. I must put some shield between us and this torture.’

He spoke rapidly, almost harshly ; it was the first time that his voice had ever lost its softness, his manner the tenderness natural to him at all times, and doubly gentle ever to her. She gave one heavy, hopeless sigh, and Sabretasche, as he heard it, shivered from head to foot. He dared no longer be with her alone, and—he led her back into the crowded ball-room. There were many

masks worn that night, at that bal masqué of the Duchesse de La Vieillecour's!

Violet left immediately; she told her father she felt unwell and wanted rest. It was true enough! Sabretasche had quitted the house at once; he could not be with her before the eyes of others, and he watched her as he had watched her in the Champs Elysées, going to her carriage, with all her high-bred and delicate beauty—that beauty that must never be his.

He reproached himself for having given her the torture of the past hour. Such tempests of the heart as they passed through that night, do the work of years upon those who endure them. Thinking of her trial before his own, Sabretasche, who felt as if he could never make reparation to her for having drawn down on her the curse of his own fate, at any cost to himself would, had he been able, have spared her, were it but an iota of the grief brought on her young head. He loved Violet Molyneux with such love as is very rare among men or women!

He walked along under the calm April skies, careless of the groups that jostled him on the trottoir, from the gay students, chanting their *chansons à boire*, to the piteous outcasts whose last home would be the Morgue; from the light-hearted,

bright-eye grisette of the Quartier Latin, to the wretched chiffonnier of the Faubourg d'Enfer, stopping to carry rags and filth away as wealth. He walked along, wandering far, across the Pont Neuf, and into the old Cité, unconscious where he went, blind to the holy beauty of the midnight stars, deaf to the noisy laughter of the midnight revellers, till a shrill voice struck on his ear, the voice of a woman, ‘*Limosina per la carità, signor!*’

The language of his childhood and his youth, always stirred a chord of tenderness and of regret in his heart. For his fondest endearments, Italian words rose to his lips, and in his hours of strongest passion, Italian was the language in which he would first and most naturally have spoken. Despite the chain that Italy had hung upon him, he loved her, and he loved her language, with one of the deep and mournful attachments with which we love what has cost us heavily, and which is yet dear to us. From his musings, that shrill voice, with its ‘*Carità, carità, signor!*’ startled him with a sudden shock. Perhaps something in the tones stung him with a vague pang of remembrance, a pang as of an old wound suddenly struck in the dark by an unseen hand. At any rate, involuntarily, for the sake of the Italian words, he stretched out his hand with the alms she begged.

The face was haggard, faded, stamped with the violence of a fiendish temper, inflamed with the passion for drink ; the eyes red, the lips thin, the brow contracted, the hair gray and spare—the face of a virago, the face of a drunkard. Still, with an electric thrill of memory, it took him back to another face, twenty years younger, with delicate colouring, smooth brow, long shining hair, and dark voluptuous eyes—another, yet the same, marked and ruined even then with the stain of the same virago passions.

He gazed upon her, that dim and horrible memory struggling into birth by the light of the gas-lamp ; her bloodshot eyes looked up at him ; and *thus*, after twenty years, Sabretasche and his faithless wife met once again in life.

He gazed upon her as men in ancient days gazed on the horrible visage of the Medusa, fascinated with a spell that, while they loathed it, held them tight bound there, to look till their eyes grew dim and their hearts sick unto death on what they dreaded and abhorred ; fascinated, he gazed upon her, the woman who had betrayed him ; fascinated, she gazed on him, the husband she had wronged. They recognized each other ; the tie that had once bound them, the wrong that had once parted them, would have taught them

to know each other, though twice twenty years had parted them; he who had wedded and loved her, she who had wedded and dishonoured him.

There they stood, in the midnight streets of Paris, face to face once more. They, husband and wife! They, those whom God had joined together! Oh! farce and folly and falsehood! There they stood together. The man, with his refined and noble bearing, his generous and chivalric nature, his highly-cultured intellect, his fastidious tastes, his proud susceptibilities, sensitive to dishonour, incapable of a base thought or a mean act. And *she*—the beauty she had once owned distorted with the vile temper and ravings of a shrew; on face and form the stamp of a virago's passions, of a conscience dead, of a brain besotted with the drink to which she had latterly flown as consoler and companion; a creature from whom a passer-by would shrink with loathing of the evil gleaming in her eyes; the type of that lowest, most debased, most loathsome womanhood, ruined by the worst of passions, drink, from whom, if such reeled out before him from a gin-palace, or passed him on the pavé, he shrank with disgust.

*Yet* these were husband and wife!

She looked up in his face—up into those melancholy and lustrous eyes, which seemed to

her the eyes of an avenging angel; for, the last time that they had gazed upon her he had flung her from him in self-defence—a murderess in her mad and vengeful temper, in her dire hatred of him for coming between her and the love that sinned against him.

All his wrongs, all the memories of that betrayal of which he had no *proof* to give the world, but which had stung and eaten into his very soul—all the torture which his tie to this woman had brought on his head and on hers who was dearer than his life—all the joys of which this wife, so false to him, had robbed him—all the horror, the bitterness, the misery of his bondage to this woman—all rushed upon him at the sight of the wife to whom fate condemned him. His face grew stern, with an iron bitterness rare with him. Wronged pride, outraged trust, violated honour, loathing, scorn, pity, an unspoken accusation, which was more full of reproach and rebuke than any words, were written on his face as, sick unto death, he turned involuntarily from her—deeply as she had erred to him, she was sunk too low for him to upbraid. With a shudder he turned from her; but—with an inarticulate cry and gurgle in her throat, she fell down on the flagstone of the street. Confused, and but half-conscious from the draught

with which she had drugged her thoughts and satisfied the passion which had grown upon her, as the passion for drink grows ever on its victims; strongly imbued with the superstition of her country; while vague stray remnants of the miracles, the credulities, and the legends of her religion still dwelt in her mind too deep for any crime, to uproot her belief in them;—the pale stern face of her husband, with the dark, melancholy, reproachful eyes that gazed upon her with a voiceless rebuke which touched her into remorse for the lengthened wrong her life had done him, seemed, as he stood suddenly before her in the faint cold light of the moon, as the face of an Avenging Angel beckoning her to the chastisement of her crimes. Debilitated and semi-delirious, her strength eaten and burnt away by the deadly absinthe, her mind hazy and clouded, impressionable to the superstitions of her creed and country; struck with terror at what her weak mind fancied was a messenger of retribution from the heaven she alternately reviled, blasphemed, and dreaded; with a shrill cry of horror and appeal, she fell down at Sabretasche's feet a helpless, moveless mass, lying still, death-like, huddled together in the cold, clear moonlight, on the glistening pavement, before the man her life had wronged.

Sabretasche's impulse was to leave her there; to fly for ever from the spectacle of the woman he had once loved fondly, and who had once slept innocently on his heart, thus lost and thus degraded; to leave for ever the presence of a wife who outraged every sense, every taste, every feeling, but to whom the law still bound him, because from a drunkard no divorce is granted!

But pity, duty, humanity stayed him. Though she was his enemy, she was a woman; though she had wronged him, she was now in want; though she had forsaken, betrayed, and robbed him of more than twenty long years' peace and joy, she had *once* been his love. He had once vowed to cherish and protect her, and, though Heaven knows, she had long ago lost all right or power to appeal to those vows, or that care, he would not leave her there, alone in the Paris streets at midnight, lying in the kennel like a dog. A crowd gathered round them in an instant—round the man with his patrician's grace and beauty, and the woman lying at his feet, squalid and repulsive, all the more loathsome, for the shadow of past loveliness that remained, showing all that nature would have left so fair, but for the vile human passions that had ruined and destroyed it. Among the crowd was a young medical

student from the Quartier Latin, on his way from the Morgue, who stooped down to look at her as she lay, and then raised his eyes to Sabretasche.

‘*Monsieur ! regardez comme elle saigne !*’

A dark crimson stream was welling from her lips out on to the pavement, white and glistening in the moonlight. With a sickening shudder Sabretasche turned away. He had seen the horrors of war ; he had looked on suffering and bloodshed with that calmness and tranquillity of nerve which soldiers learn perforce ; but a sudden faintness seized him at the sight of that life-stream which, perchance, bore with it the last throbs of an existence which was the curse of his own. The street faded from his view, the voices of men grew confused in his ear, the gray moonlight seemed to whirl round and round him in a dizzy haze, out of which glared and laughed in mocking horror the face of a fiend—the face of his Wife. His brain lost all consciousness ; life seemed slipping from his grasp ; he saw nothing, he heard nothing, he was conscious of nothing, save that horrible loathsome face close to his, with its wild bloodshot eyes dragging him with her down, down, down—away from life—into a vague hell of horror.

The night wind fanning his brow awoke him

from his swoon; the voices around him seemed to bring with them a glad rush of free, healthful, welcome life; the delirium of his brain faded away in the clear light of the moon. The truth rushed on him with the questions of the medical student as to his own health, the young fellow having noticed the sudden stagger with which he reeled back, and the deadly pallor of his face. He answered the glance with which Sabretasche asked the question his lips refused to put into words.

‘They have taken that poor woman, monsieur, to the Café Euphrosyne to see what’s the matter with her before she goes to the hospital. My friend Lafitolle is with her.’

Sabretasche thanked him for his care, and asked him to show him the Café Euphrosyne. He longed to leave the place, to go where he could run no risk of hearing, seeing, coming again in contact with the terrible phantom of the night—the phantom that was no spirit-form moulded by the fancies of his brain to be dissolved in the clear and sunny light of morning, but a dark and hopeless reality from which there was no awakening. But he knew by her prayer, ‘Carità! carità!’ that she must be in want, poverty-stricken, and probably, now that he could make no more money from her

claims on himself deserted by her brother; and the heart of Sabretasche was too generous, too gentle, too full of knightly and chivalric feeling, to leave her without aid to suffer, perhaps to die, homeless and destitute in the hospital of a foreign city.

The Café Euphrosyne was rather a low and not over-cleanly house in the by-street into which Sabretasche unconsciously had wandered, chiefly frequented by the small shopkeepers of the quartier; but the people of the house were good-hearted, good-natured, cheerful people—a man and his wife, with whom the world went very well in their own small part of it, and who, unlike the generality of people with whom the world goes well, were very ready and willing to aid, if they could, any with whom it went ill. Their café was open and lighted; Gringoire Virelois—the young *épiciier* over the way—was giving a supper after the Cirque Olympique to his *fiancée*, Rose Dodu, and her friends, and in an inner room the good mistress of the house was venting pitiful exclamations and voluble compassion on the poor woman whom her bon ami, the water-carrier, had lifted on his broad Auvergnat shoulders and borne into her café, at the instance of M. Lafitolle, a medical student.

There, on a table, lay the once beautiful Tuscan, surrounded by a crowd—the many curious, the few compassionate—the life-blood still dropping slowly from between her thin ashy lips, her blood-shot eyes closed, her haggard cheeks more hollow still from their leaden hue, the hair that he remembered so golden and luxuriant now thin and spare, and streaked with gray, far more so than her years warranted. As Sabretasche drew near the door of the chamber a murmur ran among the people that the English milord knew something of her, and on the strength of it Lafitolle came forward to Sabretasche.

‘Pardon, monsieur, but may I ask if you know anything of this poor woman, of her family, of where she comes from? If not, she shall go to the hospital!’

The flush of pain and of pride that passed over Sabretasche’s face, and then passed away, leaving it palid as any statuary, did not escape the young student’s quick eyes.

‘No,’ he answered quickly. ‘Do not send her to the hospital. Let her remain here; I will defray the expenses.’

He took out his purse as he spoke, and at sight of the glittering gold within it, and the sum he tendered her out of it, Madame Riollette, though

as little mercenary as a woman can be who lives by the money she makes, thought what an admirable thing it is to fall in by fate with an English milord; and immediately acquiesced in his wish for her to receive the stranger, and listened with the humblest respect while he bade her do all that was necessary, and send for some surgeon, whom the young student recommended as the nearest and the most clever.

Sabretasche waited there, leaning against the door of the café, the night wind blowing on his fevered forehead, a thousand conflicting thoughts and feelings at war within him, till the surgeon who had been brought thither came down the stairs. As he passed him, Sabretasche arrested him.

‘Monsieur, allow me to ask. Is she—will she—’

He paused; not to save his life could he have framed the question to ask if hers were in jeopardy; hers, dark with the wrong of twenty years’ wrong to him; hers, so long the curse upon his own; hers, the sole bar between himself and Violet.

‘Will she live?’ guessed the surgeon. ‘No, not likely. She has poisoned herself with absinthe, poor wretch. I suppose you found her on the pavement, monsieur? It is very generous to

assist her so liberally. Shocking thing that absinthe—shocking! Bonsoir, monsieur.'

The surgeon, without awaiting a reply to any of his questions, went off, impatient to return to the écarté he had left to attend his summons to the Café Euphrosyne, and Sabretasche still leaned against the door-post in the clear starlight, while the soft, fresh rush of the night wind, and the noisy revelry from Rose Dodu's betrothal supper, alike passed by him unheeded.

His heart throbbed, his pulse beat rapid time, his brain whirled with the tide of emotions that rushed through him. For more than twenty years he had not seen his wife; he had left her that day when he had flung her from him, in self-defence, as he would have flung a tigress clinging to him with its cruel griffes, a young and beautiful woman, with the rounded form, the delicate outline, the luxuriant hair, the rich colouring of youth. As such he had always thought of her. In absence we seldom give account for the ravages of time; and this haggard, wild-eyed woman, with her whitening hair, her thin lips, her hollow cheeks, her remnant of bygone loveliness, only sufficient to render more distinct the ruinous touch of years of bad passions, and of that deadly love of stimulants which stamps itself so surely on its victims, seemed

to him like some hideous caricature or phantom, rather than the real presence of his wife. For more than a score of years his eyes had not rested on her, and the change which time had wrought, and temper and drink hastened, shocked him, as a young child, laughing at its own gay, fair face in a mirror, would start, if in its stead he saw the worn and withered features he should wear in his old age. This sudden resurrection of the memories of his youth; this sudden meeting with the wife so long unseen; this abrupt transition from the delicate, fresh, and exquisite loveliness of Violet Molyneux, to the worn, haggard, repulsive form of the woman who barred him from her; took a strange hold upon him, and struck him with a strange shock: such as I have felt coming out of the warm, bright, voluptuous sunshine of a summer's day into the silent, damp, midnight gloom of a cavern. And side by side with this face, seen in the glare of the gaslight, with that harsh voice and shrill cry for alms, ‘Carità! cairta!’ and those wild, bloodshot eyes lifted to his, rose the memory of the one so young, so fair, with its soft lips white with pain, and the clinging clasp of the fond hands, and the quiver in the low and tender voice, ‘I count sorrow from your hand dearer than joy from any other.’ Side by side

they rose before him ; and, with such delirium as they might know who, on the scaffold, putting up their last prayer to God, and taking their last look of the golden sunlight and the laughing earth, saw the Pardon which beckoned them to life among their fellow-men from the very border of their grave, there came rushing through his heart and brain the thought of *freedom*—the freedom that would come with Death ! To banish it he would have needed to be Deity, not Man.

He leaned there against the door, his thoughts mingling in strange chaos, death and life ; at once going back to the buried past of his youth and on to the possible future of his manhood. Rose Dodu and her party, brushing past him with their light French jests, going homewards after their merry supper, roused him to the actual moment ; and ere the house closed for the night he turned and sought Madame Riolette, to bid her have all that might be necessary for the comfort and the care of her charge, and wait for no solace that money could bring, to soothe the dreary passage to the grave, of the woman whose life had blasted his. Church people, I know, looked on Sabretasche as an *âme damnée* and a lost spirit—as a child of wrath, ungodly, worldly, given over to dissipation, and scepticism, and self-indulgence

—yet, if I had wronged him, or were in need, I would rather have his reading of charity and forgiveness than that of ‘eminent Christians,’ though theirs is ‘doctrinal and by grace,’ and his the simple offspring of a gentle heart, a generous nature, and a tolerant mind, which, knowing much evil in itself, forbore to avenge much evil in others.

Madame Riollette listened to his injunctions with the reverence which gleaming Napoleons are sure to gain for their owner all the world over, and promised to give the sufferer every care and comfort—a promise she would have kept without any bribe, for she was full of the ready and vivacious kindness of her country, and was one of the best-natured little women that ever breathed.

‘Monsieur would not like to speak to the poor woman?’ she asked, hesitatingly.

‘No,—no,’ said Sabretasche, hastily, with that flush of pain which every thought of his wife brought with it.

‘But, monsieur,’ went on Madame Riollette, submissively, her little head, with its white cap and its ponderous earrings, hung bashfully down, afraid of seeming rude to this English milord, in whom she, with French intuition, discerned that ring of ‘aristocrat,’ which true in heart to the

white lilies, the *Riolette* revered and adored—  
'if monsieur could speak Italian it would be such a kindness to the poor woman. No one in the house could, and since she had become conscious, she kept murmuring Italian words, and seemed so wretched no one could understand them. As monsieur had been already so nobly benevolent to her, if monsieur would not mind adding so greatly to his goodness—'

And Madame *Riolette* paused, awed to silence by the pallor and the set sternness on *Sabretasche's* face. She thought he was angry with her for her audacity, and began a trembling apology. Poor woman! his thoughts were far enough away from her. A struggle rose within him; he had an unconquerable loathing and shrinking, from ever looking again upon the face of the woman who had wronged him; yet, a strange mournful sort of pity awoke in him, as he heard of her muttering words in their mutual language in foreign ears upon her death-bed, and he thought of her young, lovely, as he had first seen her among the pale-green olives of *Montepulto*, almost as young, almost as lovely as *Violet Molyneux*.

He stood still some moments, his face turned from the inquisitorial light of Madame *Riolette's* hand-lamp; then he lifted his head:

‘Lead the way.’

She led the way up a narrow staircase and along a little corridor, and opened for him a door through which Sabretasche had to bend his head to pass, and ushered him into a chamber; small, it is true, but with all the prettiness and comforts Madame Riollette had been able to gather into it, and neither close nor hot, but full of the sweet evening air that had come in; blowing far from the olive-groves of the sufferer’s native Tuscany, across the purple Alps and the blue mountains of Auvergne, over the deep woods, and stretching meadows, and rushing rivers of the interior, till it came fresh and fragrant, laden with life and perfume, bearing healing on its wings, to the heated, feverish, crowded streets of Paris.

Sabretasche took the lamp from the woman’s hand, and signed her to retire, a hint which Madame Riollette interpreted by seating herself by the little table in the window and taking out her knitting, pondering, acute Parisienne that she was, on what possible connection there could be between the poor, haggard, wretched-looking woman on her bed, and the graceful, aristocratic milord Anglais.

By the light of the lamp in his hand, Sabretasche stood and gazed upon his wife, as she lay

unconscious of his gaze, with her eyes closed, and scarcely a pulsation to be seen that could mark life from death. He looked upon her face, with the stamp of vicious and virago passion on every line, on the bony, nervous hand that had been raised, in their last parting, against his life; the hand which bore on its finger the key that had locked the fetters of marriage round and about him with such pitiless force, the badge of a life-long bondage, the seal that stamped the death-warrant of his liberty and peace!—the wedding-ring that in the joyous glow, and blind fond trust of youth, he had placed there, his heart beating high, with all a lover's tenderest thoughts, the sign as he then believed of life-long joy and union with a woman who loved him as well and as truly as he loved her! He thought of his bride as she had looked to him on his marriage morning in Tuscany, fair as woman could ever need to be, with the orange-flowers and myrtles gathered with the dews of dawn glittering upon them, wreathed among her rich and golden hair; he looked upon her now, with the work of twenty years stamped upon her face, twenty years of wrong, of evil, of debasing thought, of avaricious passions, in which she had lived on the money of the husband she had wronged, to spend it in the lowest of all vices,

drink. He knew nothing of how those twenty years had been passed, but he could divine nearly enough, seeing the wreck and ruin they had wrought. And he was tied to this woman!—if she rose from that bed of sickness, he was bound to her by law! His heart recoiled with horror, and sickened at the thought; reason, sense, nature revolted, outraged and indignant at the hideous bondage. He longed to call the world that condemned him to such, around him where he stood, and ask them how they dared to fetter him to such a wife, to such a tie; chaining him to more horrible companionship than those inflict who chain the living body to the festering corpse, never to be unloosed till welcome death release the prisoner, consigned to such horror unspeakable, by his own kind, by his own fellow-men!

As he gazed upon her, the light of the lamp falling on her eyes, aroused her from the semi-conscious trance into which she had fallen, weakened by the loss of blood, which, though not great, had taken away the little strength and power which she had, all vitality and health having been eaten gradually up by the poison she had loved and courted—poison slow, but ever sure.

Her eyes unclosed and fastened on him with a wild, vacant stare; then she covered her face with her hands, and cowered down among the bed-clothes in mortal terror, muttering trembling and disjointed words:

‘Oh, Santa Maria! have mercy, have mercy! I have erred, I have sinned, I confess it! Send him away, send him away; he will kill me with his calm sad eyes, they pierce into my soul! I was mad—I hated him—I knew not what I did. Oh, Mother of God, call him away! I am ready, I will come to the lowest hell if you will, so that I may not see him. His eyes, his eyes.—Holy Jesus, call him away!’

Her voice rose in a faint, shrill shriek, the phantasma of her brain was torture to her. She cowered down among the clothes, trembling and terror-stricken, before the gaze of the man she had betrayed, who, to her wandering brain, seemed like an avenging angel sent to carry her to an eternal abode among the damned.

‘Poor soul, poor soul!’ murmured Madame Riollette to her knitting-needles, ‘that’s how she’s been going on for the last hour. I wish the milord Anglais would let me send for the Père Lavoisier. If anybody can give rest to a weary sinner it is he.’

Sick at heart with the scene, and filled with a mournful pity for the wreck he saw before him, Sabretasche tried to calm her with some Italian words of reassurance and compassion; but the sound of her native language seemed only to excite her more wildly still. She glared at him; her dark eyes, bloodshot and opened wide, recalling to him their last parting, when they had glittered upon him with the fire of a tigress, and the hatred of a murderess. She sprang up with a convulsive movement and signed him frantically from her.

‘Go away, go away! I know you; you are Vivian, my husband; you are come from hell to fetch me. I have sinned against you, and I would sin again. I hate you—I *hate* you! Go to your English love! but you can never marry her—you can never marry her. *I* am your wife. All the world will tell you so, and I will not let you kill me. I will live—I will live, to curse you as I have—’

She sank back on her pillows, her little strength exhausted with the violence of her passions; her eyes still glaring, but half consciously, on him—quivering, panting, foaming at the mouth like a wild animal after a combat; there was little of humanity, nothing of wo-

manhood, left in her—and—this woman was his wife.

She lay on the bed, her wild eyes fixed on him, breathing loudly and quickly, defiant, though powerless, like a wounded tigress, stricken down in her strength, but with the fell ferocious instinct still alive within her. Then she began again to shrink, and tremble, and cower before her own thoughts; and hiding her face in her hands, began to weep, murmuring some Latin words of the Church prayers, and calling on the Virgin's aid.

‘I have sinned—I have sinned; oh, Madre di Dio, save me! *Fili Redemptor mundi Deus, miserere nobis.* What are the words—what are the words; will no one say them? I used to know them so well! I can remember nothing; perhaps I am dying—dying, unconfessed and unabsolved. Where is Padre Cyrillo, he would give me absolution? Let me confess, let me confess, O Santa Maria, before I die!’

Weary of the scene whose horrors he had no power to soften, heart-sick of the human degradation before him, Sabretasche turned to Madame Riollette:

‘Is there no priest you could summon?’

‘Oh, yes, monsieur,’ answered that good little Catholic, warmly. ‘There is the Père Lavoisier,

the curé of Sainte Cécile, and so good a man ! He will rise any hour, and go through any weather, to bring a ray of comfort to any soul ; and he can speak her language, too, for he is half Italian.’

‘Send for him,’ said Sabretasche, briefly, ‘and show me to another room. You shall be well paid for all your trouble. I knew your patient in other days ; I intend to remain here till the surgeon’s next visit.’

He spoke more briefly and hurriedly than was his wont ; but Madame Riollette did not heed it. She would have been only too glad to have him always there, provided he paid as he had done that night, and ushered him with many apologies into the room which had lately witnessed Rose Dodu’s *fête des fiançailles*. The scent of the air, reeking with stale wine and the odours of the late supper, struck distastefully on Sabretasche’s senses, so used to refinement and luxury that no campaigning could dull or blunt them ; and throwing open one of the small casements, he sat down by the open window, leaning out into the cool, silent street, over whose high pointed roofs the gray dawn was growing lighter, and the morning stars larger. He felt a strange, irresistible fascination to stay there till he knew whether this life would

revive to be again a curse to his; or whether the icy hand of death would unloose the fetters man refused to sever. Yet they were horrible hours—hours of fear and longing, of dread which seemed so hideously near akin to murder; of wild, delirious hope, which for his life he could not have chilled; horrible hours to him in which he waited to know whether with another's death existence would bloom anew for him, and from another's grave the flowers of hope spring up in all their glories.

He had bade Madame Riollette, when she had brought him some *café au lait* and brandy—for he had taken nothing for many hours—to let him know when the surgeon had paid his next visit; and awaiting the medical man's opinion, he sat by the open window, while the soft April dawn grew clearer and brighter, and the sparrows began to twitter on the house-tops, and the hum of human life to awake in Paris. He sat there, for what seemed to him an eternity, his nerves strung to tension, till every slight sound in the street below him, the taking down of the shop shutters, the cry of the water-carriers, the bark of the dogs, jarred upon his brain; and every minute passed heavily away as though it were a cycle of time. His heart beat fast and thick as a knock

came on the panels of the door, and it was with difficulty he could steady his voice to give the permission to enter. He expected to see the surgeon; instead, he saw the curé of Sainte Cécile, a mild, silver-haired, gentle-voiced old man, of whom all Madame Riollette's praise was true.

'May I speak to monsieur?'

'Certainly, *mon père*,' answered Sabretasche, to whom, from his long years' residence in Italy, the title came naturally.

'You know the sufferer to whom I was called?'

Sabretasche bent his head; evasion of the truth never at any moment occurred to him.

'You are her husband?'

The blood rushed over his face; he, the haughty gentleman, the refined patrician, shrank as from the insult of a blow, from the abrupt question which told him, that his connection with the woman who dishonoured his name, who cursed his career, who blotted his escutcheon, and had now sunk so low that any honest day-labourer might have shrunk from acknowledging her as his wife, was no longer a secret, but known so widely that a stranger might unhesitatingly tax him with it.

'By whose authority do you put these questions to me?' he asked, with that careless hauteur

which had made the boldest man among his acquaintance pause before he provoked Vivian Sabretasche.

‘By no authority, monsieur,’ replied the priest, mildly, ‘except that which commands me to do what I think right without regard to its consequences to me. Under the seal of confession I have heard the sufferer’s story; the one her life has sinned against is her husband; him she saw this night standing by her bedside; him she will never now rest without seeing again, to ask his pardon. When Madame Riollette told me of your benevolence to the poor woman who had been found dying in the street, I thought you must be he whom she implores Heaven to bring to her, that she may sue for his forgiveness before the grave closes over her—’

‘Is she dying?’ His voice was hoarse and inarticulate as he asked the brief question.

‘Fast; when another night closes in—nay, most likely when noon is here, she will have ceased to live.’

Sabretasche turned to the window, and leaned his forehead on his arm, the blood rushed like lightning through his veins, his breathing was quick and loud, like a man who, having borne a weary burden through a long day of heat and

toil, flings it suddenly aside; and his lips moved with a single word, too low to stir the air, but full of inexpressible tenderness and thanksgiving,—the one word, ‘*Violet!*’ Alone, he would have bowed his face upon his hands and wept like a woman; in the presence of another he turned with that calm and equable gravity which until he had last loved, nothing had had power to disturb. The traces of deep and strong emotions were on his face, but he spoke as tranquilly as of old.

‘You have guessed rightly; I am her husband by law, though I myself for twenty years have never held, nor would ever hold, myself as bound in any way by moral right to her. She has forfeited all claim or title to call me by such a name. Since you have heard her story—if she have told it you as truthfully as those of your creed profess to tell everything in their confession—you can judge that an interview between one who has caused, and another who has suffered from, a lifelong wrong, could be productive of peace to neither. I have cared for her, finding her suddenly ill in the streets; I have sent for medical aid; I have given Madame Riollette, and I now give you, full power to do everything that wealth can do to soothe and soften her last moments; beyond that,

I do not recognize her as my wife, and I refuse to see again a woman who, when I left her, would have sought my life, and who, even now, drove me away from her with curses.'

He spoke calmly, but there was a set sternness on his face; compassion had made him act gently to his wife, but it had not banished the haughty and bitter wrath which wronged pride and outraged trust had ever awakened at her memory or her name.

'But, monsieur,' interrupted the old curé, gently, 'if your wrongs are great, death will soon expiate them; if her errors to you are many, she will be soon judged by a God more merciful, we must all for our own sakes hope, than Man is ever to his fellows. I have just administered the last offices to her. I should scarcely have done that had she been still hardened and impenitent. She repents; can any of us do more than that, monsieur? And have not all, even the very best, much of which we *must* repent if we have any conscience left? It is hardly fitting for us to sit in judgment on any other, when in ourselves we have much evil unexamined and unannealed, and, if there were no outer checks, but constant opportunity and temptation, crime enough in the purest of us to make earth a hell? Your wife repents, monsieur. She

has something to confess to you, without which she cannot die in peace, not even in such peace as she may yet win, poor soul ! A word from you will calm her, will give her the only comfort she can ever have this side the grave. You have very much to pardon ; but oh, monsieur, when you lie on your own death-bed, you will thank God if you have conquered yourself, and not been harsh to her on hers.’

They were simple words. The curé of Sainte Cécile had never had much eloquence, and had been chosen for a crowded parish, where kind words and good deeds were more wanted, and better understood, than rounded periods and glowing tropes. They were simple words, but they touched the heart of his auditor, awaking all that was gentle, just, and tolerant in his nature. It was true. What was he, that he should judge?—what his life, that he had title to condemn another? It was the creed he had ever held in that fashionable world, where men and women sin themselves and redeem their errors by raking up scandal, and preaching moral sermons upon others, and seek to hide the holes in their own garments by hooting after another’s rags ; it had ever been his creed that toleration, and not severity, was the duty of humanity, and he had sneered with his

most subtle wit at those, who from the pulpit or the forum, rebuked the sins they in themselves covered, with their surplices, or their robes. Should he turn apostate from his creed now, when it called him to act up to it? Should he dare to be harsh to this woman, simply because it happened to be against himself that her errors had been committed? He wavered a moment, then—his sense of clemency and justice conquered.

‘ You are right. I have no title to judge her. I will see her, if you think it best.’

And the priest, as he looked up into his face, with its pale and delicate beauty, and its earnest and melancholy eyes, thought ‘ what a noble heart this woman has wronged and thrown away.’

## CHAPTER VII.

## RELEASE.

ALONE, Sabretasche mounted the narrow staircase, entered the bed-chamber, and signed to Madame Riolette to leave him there—alone, by the gray faint light of the dawn, he drew near the death-bed of his wife, and stood silently beside her. The opiate the surgeon had given her in his second visit had soothed and calmed her; the wildness and ferocity of her eyes had gone, but the hand of death lay heavily upon her. She looked up once at him as he stood there, then covered her face with her hands and wept, not loudly or passionately, but long and unrestrainedly, like a child after a great terror.

‘I hear that you wished to see me,’ said Sabretasche, in that low, sweet, melodious tongue in which, long ago, among the orange-trees and olive-groves of Tuscany, he had vowed his love-words to her.

She lifted her eyes to his with a shrinking

shame, and terror, that touched him to the core.

‘I have wronged you—I have hated you—I have cursed you—I have stood between you and your happiness for twenty weary years,’ she moaned. ‘You can never forgive me—never—never; it were too much to hope! Yet I wanted to see you once before I die; I wanted to tell you all. Even though your last words be a curse upon me, I should have no right to complain. I have deserved it.’

‘You need not fear my curse,’ answered Sabretasche, slowly and with effort, as though speech were painful. ‘If I cannot say I forgive, I am not likely to insult you in your suffering with useless recrimination. We have been separated for one-and-twenty years; I am willing not to evoke the wrongs and dishonour of the past, but to part in such peace as memory will allow.’

He spoke gently, but with an involuntary sternness and a deep melancholy, so deep that it was an unconscious reproach, which struck with a keener pang into the heart of the woman who had wronged him than violent words of fierce upbraiding. She clenched her hands convulsively:

‘Do not speak so gently, for God’s sake, or you will kill me! I would rather hear you curse,

rebuke, reproach, upbraid me; anything rather than those low, soft tones. I have wronged you, hated you, lied to you; robbed you, betrayed you, dishonoured you; to speak so gently to me is to heap coals of fire on my head! I repent—I repent, God knows; but, at the eleventh hour, what value is my remorse? For twenty years I have wronged you; what good is it for me to tell you I repent when I am dying, and can harm you no longer if I would?’

Sabretasche was silent; her voice, her gestures, her words struck open his wounds afresh. He felt afresh the cruel, bitter sting of his betrayal; he thought of Violet, of all he had suffered, of all he had made her suffer; and his hatred for the woman who had stood so long between them flamed up in all its strength. He might have pardoned his own wrongs, but the sufferings of the one beloved by him—never!

His wife glanced upward at his averted face, and shivered at the dark look it wore:

‘Madre di Dio! you will never forgive me?’

He was silent. Again she repeated her passionate wailing prayer:

‘Madre di Dio! you will never forgive me?’

He glanced at her with a shudder and a weary sickening sigh from his heart’s depths:

‘*I cannot!*’

The words roused the evil in her, which the Curé had thought those vain ‘last offices’ had exorcised; the savage passion gleamed again in them, and she sprang up like a dying panther:

‘No! because you love your English mistress! Would to Heaven I could live and keep you from her!’

‘Silence!’ broke in Sabretasche, so sternly that she started and trembled as she heard him. ‘Never dare to pollute *her* name with your lips! I came at your request, but not to be reproached or questioned. Your own conscience must accuse you of the wrong you did me. For more than twenty years you were content to live upon the gold of the husband you had betrayed. For more than twenty years you have been a clog upon my life, a stain upon my name, a festering wound in my side, a bar from all peace, all happiness; and yet because I could not *prove*, you would not even make the only reparation left in your power—acknowledgment of the wrong you knew had parted us.’

‘But I acknowledge it *now*; I repent it *now*, Vivian! No one can do more than that!’

To the lips of the man of the world rose naturally the satire which was habitual. Yes! she

confessed and repented now that life was ebbing from her grasp, revenge no longer possible, and acknowledgment unneeded; as people who have played their last card out on earth, turn frightened, with weakened nerve, to God, insulting Him and flattering their priests with ‘death-bed repentances!’ and timorous recantations, which they would have laughed at in their day of better health and stronger brain! But he was too generous and too merciful to utter the sneer which rose involuntarily to his lips, to a woman helpless and dying, who, however bitterly she had betrayed him, was now powerless to harm. The wretched state of a creature he had once loved, struck him with keen pain; her suffering, her poverty, her degradation touched him, and he could not look on the utter wreck of what he had last seen, perfect in youth and beauty, without pity, in which his own hate was quenched, his own wrong avenged. He answered her more gently, and very sadly:

‘I did not come here to reproach you. Your conscience must know the wrong you did me, and my own life has not been pure enough to give me any title to fling a stone at you.’

Well said! Libertine, sceptic, egotist, man of pleasure and fashion, as society called him, he could act up, with his most cruel enemy, to his

doctrine of toleration. It is more than most do who preach louder and with more 'orthodoxy!' But then Sabretasche did not pretend to be a saint; he was simply a man of honour! She looked at him long and wonderingly: to the fierce, inconstant, and vindictive Tuscan, this justice simply for the sake *of* justice, this toleration, given to her *against* his impulse, merely because he considered it her due, was new and very strange.

'You humble me bitterly,' she said, between her teeth. 'But I have sinned; it is right punishment. I *did* wrong you. I wedded you because I was sick of being caged in Montepulito. I never loved you; and the solitude you seemed to think like Paradise, sickened and annoyed me, till I succeeded in making it a Hell. I cared nothing for anything you cared for; your love of refinement was a constant restraint upon me; your mode of thought and feeling a constant annoyance to me. I grew to hate you, because you were too high, too delicate, too much of a gentleman for me; your superiority jarred upon me, I hated you for it. I hated you even for your affection, your gentleness, your generosity, your sweet temper, which were so many silent rebukes to me. I hated you still more when I loved Fulberto Lani.'

As she spoke her lover's name, a shudder of dark loathing passed over his face; he thought of her paramour—coarse, illiterate, low-born, low-bred—and felt, fresh as though dealt him but yesterday, the sting of his wife's infidelity.

‘I hated you,’ went on the Tuscan, rapidly, with the fictitious force given her from the opiate; ‘and when you surprised him with me, and taxed me, I would not confess to it, for I knew the confession would set you free, and I swore you should rue the fetters with which we had loaded each other. You left me. Well you might! Not long after, Lani left me too; he was an idle, worthless, inconstant do-nothing, the lover of half the women in Naples, and faithful to none. Then—you know how, yearly, my brother extorted from you the money on which we lived? Pepe was extravagant; I lived in gaiety and excitement, and sank lower and lower every day. I should have disgraced you, indeed, if our connection had been declared to your aristocratic friends! I—a drunkard—*your* wife! At last after twenty years, we heard that you loved a young English girl; loved her more than you had done other women; loved her so that you would have married her.’ . . . .

She was touching on dangerous chords if she

wanted his forgiveness!—his face grew dark, his soft sad eyes stern, and he turned involuntarily from her.

‘When we heard that you were in love with her, and that you were going to the south of France, Pepe, unknown to you, followed, and laid in your way the Neapolitan journal with the death of my aunt Sylvia; he knew it was so worded that you would believe I was dead, would deem yourself free, and would marry again where you loved. He guessed rightly; then, thinking to get from you a heavy bribe for silence, he went to you to offer, if you married your young English love, never to betray your connection with us. You refused. We could not understand your scruples. The signorina would never have known that her marriage was illegal, or that she was not really your wife. You refused, and we were beggared. I had no money to go to law against you to make you provide for me, as Pepe had threatened. We could bribe you no longer, and you went to the war in the East. My brother left me to shift for myself as I might, when he could no longer make money by my name; and I was very poor—how poor *you* cannot think. I have sunk lower and lower, till you have found me a beggar in the streets of Paris. I have done you cruel wrong;

I have given you hate for love, betrayal for trust ; I have robbed you for twenty years ; I have stood between you and your happiness, and gloried in the curse I was to you. . . . .’

She stopped, panting for breath, and exhausted ; and Sabretasche stood looking out of the window at the dawn, as it rose clearer and brighter in the fair morning skies. It had been, indeed, God knows, a cruel wrong—a wrong which had stretched over all the years of his prime—a wrong which had stolen all peace and joy from him, and from one far dearer than himself.

‘Come here ! Come nearer !’ said his wife, in faint and hollow tones, as the temporary strength that her cordial had given her, faded away.

His face was still white and sternly set as he turned unwillingly.

‘Look at me !’ she moaned piteously, lifting to him the drawn, thin, sallow face, from which every trace of beauty had long departed ; and as he looked he shuddered.

‘Now can you curse me ? Has not life avenged you ?’

He was silent ; if life had avenged his wrongs on her, he felt that it had cursed him for no sin, chastised him for no error, since to this woman, at least, he had given affection and good faith, and

had been rewarded by infidelity, ingratitude, and hate!

‘Say something to me, Vivian,’ she moaned, in pitiful despair—‘say something gentler to me! If you knew what it is to die with the curse of one we have injured on our heads! The past is so horrible, the future so dark! Oh, God! Do not send me down into my grave with your curse upon me, to pursue me through eternity, to hunt me into hell!’

‘Hush!’ said Sabretasche, his low soft tones falling with a ‘peace, be still!’ on the storm of remorse and misery before him. Hush! *I* do not curse you—God forbid—I tell you my own life is not pure enough for me to have any right to condemn yours. If I cannot say that I forgive you—at least I will do my best to think as gently of you as I can, and to forget the past. I cannot promise more.’

She caught his hands in hers; she wept, she thanked, she blessed him, with all the excitable vehemence of her national character. Weakened by suffering, terrified by death, she seemed to cling to but one thought, one hope—the forgiveness of the man whose love she had wronged from the hour she had stood with him at the marriage altar; that fatal marriage altar, so often the

funeral pyre for all man's hopes, and peace, and liberty; where, as by the priests of old, living human souls are offered up in cruel holocausts to a fanatic folly!

‘I have but one thing more to tell you—I must hasten before my strength fails me,’ she began, raising herself upon the pillows—‘I want to speak to you, Vivian, of my child—your child—’

‘The child of such a mother!—I will hear nothing of her!’

‘Santa Maria! why?’

‘*Why?* Dare you ask? How can I tell that she was mine? And even if she were, what sort of woman must she be, reared by you? You try my forbearance too far. I come here at your desire, I forgive you my own wrongs; but do more—be connected again with the past curse of my life, or recognize in the slightest way any one of the brood that conspired to stain my name, to rob me of my peace, and to bribe me to a lie;—give my name or my countenance to one bred up under the tutelage of those who, shameless themselves, betrayed me in my youth, and tempted me in my manhood to dishonour—once for all, I tell you, woman, that *I will not!*’

He spoke with more impatient anger and pas-

sionate bitterness than were often roused in his gentle and indolent nature. She had presumed too far on his forbearance! to try and farm on him a daughter of hers, probably Lani's child, or, if his own, one, whose education and mode of life must have made such as he would blush for, such as he would loathe;—to be asked to give to such an one his name—the name that Violet Molyneux would take;—roused all that was haughtiest and darkest in his nature. She had gone too far. The very thought was hateful, abhorrent, loathsome!

‘She *was* your child,’ the Tuscan repeated eagerly—‘I swear it, and I should hardly perjure myself on my death-bed! God knows whether she is living now or not; I cannot have harmed her, for I have not seen her ever since she was two years old. I put her out to nurse as soon as she was born, in a village near Naples, with a peasant-woman. Six months after her birth you and I parted, never to meet again till to-night! When the child was two years old her foster-mother brought her to me; she was going far away—I forget where—Calabria, I think, and she could keep her with her no longer. She was very lovely, poor little thing, but she reminded me of you.’

‘Silence!’ broke in Sabretasche, passionately.

To have any link of the hated chain of the past cling about him still; to have any one of this loathsome Tuscan brood forced on him now, when death was nigh to relieve him from the shame which had festered into his soul so long, stung him beyond endurance. The child of such a mother!—what had he for her but hatred? ‘Silence! I will not hear her name. I will have none of her; if she press her claim on me I will refuse to acknowledge her. Whether or no she be daughter of mine, I disown her for ever, she is dead to me for ever. Great God! is the madness of my boyhood never to cease from pursuing me!’

The dying woman raised herself on her bed with eager thirsty haste to speak while yet her brain could serve her, while yet her lips could move :

‘But you must hear me—you must! I cannot die in peace unless I tell you—she WAS your child!’

‘My child or not—she was *yours*, and I disown her! My life shall not be shamed by her, my name shall not be polluted by her.’

‘But hear me—’

‘I *will not*. If she be mine, I will acknowledge no daughter of yours. You have dishonoured me

enough; my future at least shall be free from you.'

'But hear her story—hear her story! You need never see her, never know her, but let me confess all to you—let me die in peace,' wailed the wretched woman, piteously. 'Before her birth I never sinned to you; I would not lie now, *now*, on my death-bed, face to face with Satan and Hell! She was not like you, but she had something of your look sometimes, something of your smile; her voice was like yours, too, and—you were her father! and I hated the very sight of her face. She did not like me—how should she! I was a stranger to her. She was unhappy at the loss of her nurse; she was afraid of me; I dare say I was cruel to her. At that time an English gentleman, who was staying in Naples, saw her, and took a great fancy to her. His own little granddaughter, the same age as herself, had lately died; the only relative of any kind he had left to him. She pleased him very much; he fancied he could trace a resemblance between her and his dead grandchild, and, after a time, he offered to adopt her, and to take her to England, to bring her up as if she were his own; that she was not so, no one would know, for his son's little girl, whose parents had both died since her birth, had

been born in Italy, and had never been taken home. I was only too glad to be rid for ever of her, she made me think constantly of you, and I hated you more bitterly since I had wronged you. I let her go, poor little child! I had some conscience left, and I could not bear to hear her voice even in the distance; I could not bear to see her smile, for she seemed to haunt me and reproach me for the wrong I had done her father. I let her go with the Englishman; and I have never seen her since. God knows, wherever she has been, she has been better than she would have been with me. I have never seen her; but on Christmas-eve, at Notre Dame, a young girl tendered me charity, and as I looked in her face something struck me as like your child's—as like what she might be as a woman. I do not know—it was very vague—but her smile made me think of you, and she gave me something of that sad, gentle, pitying look with which you had left me twenty years before. Most likely it was mere fancy—but it made me think of her and you. If I had not sent her from me, I should not be alone in my misery, as I am now!’

She ceased, and tears rolled slowly down her haggard cheeks. All her life this woman had thrown away the human love which had been

offered her ; without it her death-bed was very cheerless, with but two memories beside it—of the husband she had wronged and the child she had deserted.

‘ You never knew that English stranger, Vivian ? ’ she asked, wistfully.

‘ What was his name ? ’ asked Sabretasche, coldly.

‘ Tressillian.’

‘ Tressillian ! ’ repeated Sabretasche, with an involuntary start—‘ Tressillian ! And your daughter’s name ? ’

‘ Was Alma.’

‘ Alma Tressillian ! Good God ! ’

And as things long forgotten recur to memory at a sudden touch akin to them, he remembered how we had noticed her resemblance to his mother’s portrait hanging in his drawing-room ; how he himself had observed the likeness, though, occupied with other thoughts, it had made no impression upon him ; Alma Tressillian his daughter ! Little as he had noticed her, now, swift as thought, there came to his mind all he had ever seen or heard of her ; he remembered his two visits to St. Crucis ; he remembered her extraordinary talent for art—the genius inherited from himself ; and—he remembered, too, what Carlton had told that

night in the Crimea, that she was the mistress of Vane Castleton. Was it true? Despite her education, her frankness, her apparent delicacy, had she, indeed, hid unseen within her the leaven of her mother's nature? Had heartlessness, sensuality, treachery of character, been the sole inheritance his wife had bequeathed her child? As these memories and thoughts rushed rapidly and disconnectedly through his brain, she watched the swift changes of expression which swept over his face.

She grasped his arm eagerly :

‘ You have seen her—you know her, Vivian? What is she like now? Is she a true, fond, pure-hearted woman, or is she like me? Is she cursed with any of my vile passions? If she be, seek her out. For the love of Heaven, find her and redeem her from her fate, if to do it you must tell her how low her mother has fallen; her mother, who loved her less than the very beasts of the field can love their offspring.’

To have told this dying wretched woman of that baseless scandal with Vane Castleton, of which he knew nothing, and which all his knowledge of human character made him doubt, would have been brutality. He answered her gently and soothingly :

‘ I have seen her ; or, at least I have seen a lady whom I always heard was Mr. Tressillian’s granddaughter ; not much of her, it is true, but sufficient to make me think her a “ true, fond, pure-hearted woman ”—all that a mother might most long for her daughter to be. Will you swear to me before God that she *was* my child ? ’

With her national vehemence—that vehemence of expression which Alma had inherited from her—the Tuscan kissed the little ebony crucifix which Madame Riollette had placed before her :

‘ I swear it, Vivian, as I hope for pardon for my sins from that God whom my whole life has outraged ! ’

Sabretasche silently bowed his head. He knew that though she might have lied to him the moment before, she would not have dared to swear a falsehood to him by that symbol, which her church had taught her to hold so sacred ; and though at another hour he would have smiled at the superstition which made an oath sacred, where honour would have been broken ruthlessly ; something, despite all his wrongs, touched him painfully in these hopeless last hours of the woman whom he once had loved in his warm, glad, poetic youth — that youth which she had quenched and ruined with the bitterness of betrayal, and

bound down into bondage with the curse of iron chains.

She asked one more question :

‘Where did you see her, Vivian?’

‘Twice at her own home, and once at the house of one of our English nobles.’

‘And was she happy?’

‘She seemed so.’

‘Thank God! You will never tell her about me—never mention me to her—never let her know that the mother who neglected her, fell so low and vile, that she was a beggar in the streets; a thing whom she passed by with a dole of charity, with a pitying shudder? Never tell her. Promise me you will not. Why should she hear of me, only to know that I first hated and then disgraced her? Promise me, Vivian!’

‘I promise!’

Little as she could understand him, she knew him too well to exact an oath from him.

She looked at him wistfully :

‘You are very noble! You shame me more with your goodness than you could have done with curses and reproaches.’

‘No,’ answered Sabretasche, gently. ‘I have no claim to virtue. My life has been far too full of errors and self-indulgence, for me to have title left

to give me right to condemn another. If you have sinned, so have I. No human beings are spotless enough to judge each other. As for curses, God forbid! They would be rancorous indeed, to follow you to the grave.'

She gave a weary sigh; his forgiveness humbled and shamed her more than any upbraidings. Then her eyes closed, and she lay still. All the extraneous strength and vigour, given her by cordial and opium, had died away. She lay still, her breathing short and weak, her brow contracted, her limbs exhausted and powerless, the hand of death heavy upon her; her lips apart, her cheeks gray and hollow, her brain confused, and weighed down with the cloudy thoughts, and memories, and fears, which haunted her last hours.

And Sabretasche stood beside her, musing on the strange accident which had led him to the death-bed of the woman who had made all the misery of his life; of that cruel and inexorable tie which had bound him for so long; of the deep, unsolved problem of human nature; that book written in such different language for every reader, that it is little marvel that every man thinks his own the universal tongue, and fails even to spell out his brother's translation of it. This woman had hated him; he had loathed her; they had

been chained together by a rite the world chose to call indissoluble; they had been parted by a fierce and ineffaceable wrong; after twenty years' severance, what could this man and woman, once connected by the closest tie, once parted by the hottest passions, know of each other? what could they read of each other's heart? what could they tell or understand of each other's temptations, sufferings, and errors? And yet Church and Law, in mock morality, God help us! had bound them together, till Death, more powerful and more kindly than their fellow-men, should come to the rescue and release them!

That lifelong union of Marriage! Verily, to enter into it, it needs a great and an abiding love.

So he stood watching beside his dying wife. A future, fond and radiant, lay for him in the soft haze of coming years; yet, ere he turned to it, he paused a moment to look back to the past, to its sorrow, its sin, its trial, its conflict, its bitter wrongs. And with a new-born and unutterable happiness awaking in him, a saddened pity stole over him for the broken wreck of humanity which lay in its last feeble life-throbs before his eyes; and hatred, resentment, scorn, faded away, quenched in deep compassion. If his character

had been hers, his impulses, opportunities, education, temptation hers, how could he tell but what his sins had been like hers also? They were such, indeed, to him, whose nature was generosity, and idol honour, as seemed darkest and most loathsome; but in that dying chamber he bowed his head, and turned his eyes away from them. Just and tolerant to the last, he held it not his office to condemn—now, above all, when Death came as his avenger.

So he stood and watched beside his dying wife, the woman who had wedded him only to emancipate herself from an irksome home, and who had been a ruthless barrier between himself and liberty and peace—stood and watched her, while without, the bright morning light dawned in the eastern skies, and the song of the birds made sweet music beneath the eaves, and the soft western winds swept in through the casement into the chamber of the dying; herald of the Life born for him, and come to him, out of Death. Suddenly her eyes unclosed with a vague, lifeless stare, and she awoke to semi-consciousness as the bells of Notre Dame chimed the hour of seven—awoke startled, dreamy, delirious.

‘Hark! there is the church-bell. What is it?’

Ah ! I remember, we used to gather the lilies and the orange-flowers to dress up the high altar at home. I wish I could go there once—just once before I die, to see the vineyards, and the wheat-fields, and the olive-groves again. There are such sweet warm winds, such bright glowing skies—ah ! I was happy, I was innocent, I was sinless *there* ! Why are those bells ringing ? Are they for early mass ? No ; it is the Angelus. I forgot ! We must take lilies, plenty of lilies for the altar ; but *I* must not touch them, I should soil them, the lilies are so pure, so spotless, and I am so sunk, so polluted ; . . . . the lilies would wither if *my* hands touched them, and the priests would thrust me from the altar, and the Virgin would ask me for my child. I used to pray ; I cannot now ! Hark ! those bells are ringing, and I know the words but I cannot say them. . . . . Help me, help me. Pray, pray ; do you hear—pray !’

With piteous agony the cry rang out on the still air of the breaking day, as the dews gathered gray and thick upon her brow, and the glazing mist came over her sight, and in the darkness of coming death she struggled for memory and prayer, as a child gropes in the gloom.

‘ Pray—pray ! What are the words ? Say

them—in pity, in mercy! *He* has forgiven;—  
God will forgive! Pray—pray!’

And the voice of the man whom her life had wronged, fell softly on her ear through the dull, dizzy mists of death, as he bent over her and uttered with soothing pity the words of her Church, the prayer of her childhood, which from his lips to her was the seal of an eternal and compassionate Pardon:—

‘*Pater noster qui es in cœlis, sanctificetur nomen tuum : adveniat regnum tuum ; fiat voluntas tua sicut in cœlo et in terra ; panem nostrum quotidianum, da nobis hodie ; et dimitte nobis debita nostra, sicut et nos dimittimus debitoribus nostris ; et ne nos inducas in tentationem sed libera nos à malo. Amen !*’

Standing beside his dying wife, he spoke the prayer to the One Creator—the prayer which should have no Creeds ; and as the old familiar words winged their way to her, bringing on their echoes, memories of days long past, and innocence long lost, the wild eyes grew tamer, the bent brow relaxed, the hardened lines of age and vice grew soft ; and before the last Amen had left his lips, with one faint, broken, mournful sigh,—she died. And he standing beside her, bowed his head in reverence, before the great mystery of life

and death ; and thanked God that his last words to her had been of mercy and of pardon, that his last words had been to her, even as the words of Arthur unto Guinevere—

‘ All is passed ; the sin is sinned, and I,  
Lo ! I forgive thee, as Eternal God  
Forgives ; do thou for thine own soul the rest.’

## CHAPTER VIII.

## IN THE FOREST OF FONTAINEBLEAU.

ON the meeting of those so long held apart by the laws of Man, I need not dwell. Nothing now stood between them ; and within a few days of the night that Sabretasche had arrived in Paris, Violet Molyneux became his wife.

No empty conventionalities kept them apart ; they cared nothing what the world wondered, nor how it talked ; and they never thought of the malicious versions of their story, which were the one theme in Parisian salons. They went to the south of France for the whole of the coming year, to be away from that gay effervescing world of which both were weary ; and, under the purple skies, in the golden air, and amidst the luxurious solitudes of the Midi, shut out from those who had caressed, adored, and slandered him, far from the fret and hum and buz of outer life, Sabretasche surrendered himself to that love which gave him back the dreams of his lost youth, and even as night slinks

away before the fullness of the dawn, so the shadows of his past fell behind him for evermore.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sabretasche kept his promise. Alma never knew that it was to her own mother she had given charity after midnight mass at the doors of Notre Dame. All that had passed in that last interview with his dead wife, he told to Violet. To find in Alma the daughter of her own lover—that child whom she had hated with the fond, jealous vehemence with which a woman who loves hates all or anything that has any tie to, or connection with, her lover, or shows that another has been as near to him as she;—was intensely painful to her.

‘Your child and *hers!*’ she repeated. ‘I can never see her again! Do not ask me, I should never look upon her face without recalling her mother—the traitorous wife who could betray *you!*’

That was her first impulse; but her sense of justice conquered this. If she had never known her before, nothing on earth would have induced her to see the daughter of his dead wife; and he noticed the involuntary shudder with which she first met Alma, after his relation of her connection with himself; but she was too generous and too

just to allow the feeling influence ; and in truth, for I do not wish to claim for her any virtue she does not possess, she was too full of trembling gratitude at her own joy to bear a harsh thought to any soul on earth.

Bound by his promise to his wife, Sabretasche had been undecided whether or not to tell his daughter of the relation there was between them. It was almost impossible to do so without letting her learn, at least in some degree, what her mother's character and life had been ; her first questions so naturally would be about her mother, her dead mother, of whom she would be anxious to hear all. He had nothing to say but what would pain her ; nothing but what would compel him to break his last promise to the dead. Moreover it would have seemed a useless cruelty to rend asunder the happy associations and belief of twenty years, to substitute in their stead, a parentage that must give her pain.

He felt himself also, no pleasure at the discovery, nor any sudden affection for her sprung up in the night like a mushroom, after the custom of men who find unknown daughters in romances, and are prepared to be devoted to them, good or bad, interesting or uninteresting, from the simple fact of their being their own children. On the

contrary, to know that there was one living who bore in her the blood of the wife who had been his curse, was keenly painful to him; and he shrank from any remembrance or acknowledgment to the world, of her tie to himself. But, for De Vigne's sake, he had been interested in her before; and for this, he strove to conquer the repugnance that he felt to her from her mother; and wished to place her above the necessity of relying upon her talents, and to give her that position in the world, to which her adoption by Tressillian, as well as her relationship to himself, entitled her. To do this was difficult, without telling her what he wished to avoid; but he placed in Lord Molyneux's hands (to whom he told all) a sum, sufficient to maintain her in affluence, which, relying on her ignorance of law, could be given her as a remnant of the property of her grandfather, suddenly repaid by those who had swindled him of it. And Alma heard the Viscount's relation of her sudden inheritance, unsuspecting that any other story was concealed behind it; she was too ignorant of all legal matters to detect any flaw there might be in the tale; she knew her grandfather had lost an immense fortune in the bank, and in speculation; she was not surprised a small portion should be recovered unexpectedly.

Indeed, beyond thanking Lord Molyneux for having so kindly interested himself in her concerns, the subject occupied but few of her thoughts; for, the moment that she had seen Sabretasche in the salons of the Molyneux hotel, and that he had recognized her kindly and courteously, she had asked him for De Vigne, and he had told her of his gallantry, his daring, and the safety with which, despite his brilliant and reckless courage, he had come through all; but did not tell her of his illness, only mentioning that he had been detained in Scutari, and would soon come home, through Paris.

‘Is the curse of the marriage-tie to fall there, too?’ thought Sabretasche. ‘How will it end for them both?’

It was early morning when De Vigne arrived in Paris.

Alma’s letter had sent new life and strength into his veins; from that hour he recovered sufficiently to be moved on board the yacht of a man we knew, who, having come cruising about the Bosphorus, offered to give us a run to Marseilles. The sea air completed the recovery her letter had begun; he lay on the deck smoking, and breathing in with the fresh Mediterranean wind his old health and strength, and by the time

the ‘Sea-foam’ ran into harbour he was himself again.

It was early morning when we reached Paris—a bright spring morning in May. After the discomfort, the dirt, the myriad disagreeables of Constantinople; after the mud and rain and snow and cheerlessness of the Crimea; how gay and pleasant looked those sunny streets of Paris, where primroses and violets, cassi and lemonade, were being cried; where Polichinelle was performing, and char-à-bancs starting with light-hearted students for a day in the Bois du Boulogne; and everywhere around us we heard chattering, laughing, voluble, musical, that silvery, pleasant language, as familiar to us as our own! What a contrast it was!—a contrast very agreeable, let a man be ever so *voué au tambour*, after nearly two years such campaigning as we had tasted in the Crimea!

I drove at once to the Gare de Strasbourg on my way to England; De Vigne remained in Paris; he had an oath of vengeance to work out; a purpose to be wrought, that in the old Pagan creed he held as righteous. And, to keep the vow which he had sworn, he went straight from the Station to the Rue Lafitte, to a house which stood near the Maison Dorée, and of which the various floors

were let to various English bachelors whose *hivernages* were annually Paris.

Castleton sat in his chambers, smoking, breakfasting, reading the papers, and chatting with two of his particular chums, who had dropped in after keeping it up all the night through, in private salons of the Café Anglais. Castleton was hardly up to the mark that morning; he was annoyed and irritated at several things; first, that he had serious doubts as to the soundness of Lancer's off-leg, and if Lancer did not come in at the distance winner of the French Derby, Lord Vane's prospects would look blacker than would be desirable; in the second, the Ministry had behaved with the grossest ingratitude, by refusing him, through his father, a certain post he coveted, a piece of ill-natured squeamishness on their part, as they had but lately given a deanery to his brother, a spirit rather worse than himself; in the fourth, a larger number of little bills were floating about than was pleasant, and if there was not speedily a general election, by which he could slip into one of those neat little boroughs that were honoured by being kept in his Grace of Tiara's pocket, he was likely to be troubled with more applications than he could, not alone meet—of that he never thought—but stave off to

some dim future era. Altogether, Castleton was not in an over-good humour that morning; had sworn at his valet, and lashed his terrier till it howled, and found everything at cross purposes and a bore, from his chocolate, which was badly milled, to the news he had lately heard, that the woman whose childish hand had struck him for a coward's deed, was in Paris with those, to whom if her lips revealed the outrage once attempted to her, would fearfully and bitterly avenge it on his head. So altogether things looked dark; and they looked no better when, on issuing from his chamber to go to the drag that awaited him in the street below, he came suddenly face to face with the man he hated and feared, because he was the man that Alma loved.

They met abruptly on the stairs as the one was quitting, the other approaching, the landing-place—they met abruptly, with barely a foot between them—De Vigne and Vane Castleton; he who had insulted her past all forgiveness, and he who would not have seen a hair of her head injured without revenging it. Involuntarily, they both stood silent for a moment. De Vigne looked at him, every vein a'flame with passion, recalling all that she had told him had been poured into her young ear in that horrible hour. His lips were

pale, and set with a stern fixed purpose ; his eyes burning with the hatred that was rioting within him ; his right hand clenching hard on the riding-switch he held, as if he longed to change it into a deadlier and more dangerous weapon. He seemed to hear Castleton's hateful love-vows, and her piteous cry of terror and supplication ; he seemed to see the loathsome caress with which he had dared to touch her lips ; he seemed to feel her struggling, as if for life or death, in the vulture clutches of her hated foe ! What wonder that his hand clenched on his riding-whip, as if thirsting for that surer and deadlier weapon with which, in other days, his grandsires had defended their honour and their love !

Castleton was no coward—had he been, the Tiara blood, bad though it might be in other ways, would have disowned him—yet at the eagle eyes that flashed so suddenly upon him, his own fell for an instant. But only *for* an instant ; he recovered himself to have the first word, with a sneer on his lips and in his cold, light eyes :

‘De Vigne ! My dear fellow, how are you ? Didn't know you were in France. Come to rest yourself from that deuced hard campaign, eh ?’

‘No,’ said De Vigne, between his teeth, which were set like a lion's at sight of his foe. ‘I am

come for a harder task—to try and teach a scoundrel what honour and dishonour mean!’

His tones were too significant to leave Castleton in any doubt as to the application of his words. He drew in his lips with a nervous, savage twitch. He laughed, with a forced sneer.

‘Jealous! Are you come to bully me about that little girl of yours—what was her name—something with a Tre, I know? Really, you will waste your wrath and your powder. I have nothing whatever to do with her; she did not take *me* in. . . . .’

The words had barely passed his lips before De Vigne’s grasp was on him, tight, firm, relentless; he might with as much use have tried to escape from the iron jaws of a tiger seeking his prey, as from the grasp of the man who loved the woman he had insulted. De Vigne’s face was white with passion, his eyes burning with fiery anger, the wrath that was in him quivering and thrilling in every vein and sinew—to hear her name on that liar’s lips! He seized him in his iron grasp, and shook him like a little dog.

‘Blackguard! that is the last of your dastard lies you shall ever dare to utter! You are too low for the revenge one man of honour takes upon another; you are only fit to be punished

as one punishes a yelping mongrel or a sneaking hound!—'

Holding him there, powerless, in the grip of his left hand, he thrashed him with his riding-switch as a man would thrash a cur—thrashed him with all the passion that was in him, till the little whip snapped in two. Then he lifted him up as one would lift a dead rat or a broken bough, and threw him down the whole stone flight of the staircase: in his wrath, he seemed to have the strength of a giant.

Castleton lay at the foot of the stairs, stunned and insensible. His valet and the people of the house gazed on the scene, too amazed to interrupt it or aid him. His two friends, standing in the street criticizing the roars in his drag, rushed in at the echo of the fall. De Vigne stepped over his body, giving it a spurn with his foot as he passed.

'The deuce, De Vigne!' began one of them. 'What's up—what's amiss?'

De Vigne laughed—a haughty sneer upon his face:

'Only a little lesson given to your friend, Lord Monckton. Few will disagree with me in thinking it wanted; if they do, I can be heard of at the Hôtel de Londres. Good day to you!'

As he walked out into the street to his horse,

which was waiting for him, a small, sleek, fair man came up to him with deferential ceremoniousness.

‘I beg your pardon, Major, for intruding; but might I be allowed to inquire whether you received a letter from me when you were before Sebastopol?’

De Vigne signed him away with the broken handle of his whip:

‘When I discharge my servants, I do not expect to be followed and annoyed with their impertinence.’

‘I mean no impertinence, Major,’ persisted the man, ‘and I should not be likely to intrude upon you without some warrant, sir. Did you read my letter?’

‘Read it? Do you suppose I read the begging-letters with which rogues pester me? It is no use to waste your words here. Take yourself off!’

He spoke haughtily and angrily, as he put his foot in the stirrup; he remembered the share Raymond, then in Castleton’s employ, had taken in that vile plot, but he could not degrade her by bringing her name up to a servant, and lower himself by stooping to resent the mere hired villany of Castleton’s abettor.

‘It was not a begging-letter, Major. It would

have told you something of great importance to you, sir, if you had chosen to read it.'

'Silence!' said De Vigne, as he threw himself across the saddle, shook the bridle from his grasp, and rode away up the Rue Lafitte, turning towards the hotel in the Champs Elysées, whence that letter, he had returned unread, he remembered had been dated by Alma, and bestowing no more thought on his quondam valet, in the passion that still flamed in him, despite his vengeance.

He could have slain Castleton, the man who would have robbed him of his one earthly treasure ; who *had* robbed him of her for two years. He could have slain him, the man who had polluted her name by association with his ; who had dared to profane those young lips with his loathed and brutal caresses. He could have slain him, as Moses slew the Egyptian, in the fiery wrath and hatred of the moment ; but he refrained, as David refrained from slaying Saul, when the man who had wronged him lay in his power, sleeping and defenceless, in the still gloom of midnight. Oh ! mes frères, virtue lies not, as some think, in being too pure for temptation to enter into us, but rather in proportion to the strength of the seduction and the power of the temptation we resist. If there be such to whom like temptation never

come, happy for them, their path through life is safe and easy. If they never know the delicious perfume of the rose-garland, they never know the bitterness of the fennel and amaranth; yet closer to human sympathies and dearer to human hearts—nobler, warmer, more natural—is the man who loves and hates, errs, struggles, and repents; is quick to joy and quick to pain; who sins in haste, but is ever ready to atone, and who, though passing through the fire of his own thoughts, comes like gold worthier from the furnace.

Vane Castleton rose from that fall, sunk and degraded for ever. He had been thrashed by De Vigne as a hound by its keeper; he knew that stigma would cling to him as long as he lived. Monckton, his valet, his groom, the people of the house, had all seen it; seen him powerless in De Vigne's grasp; seen him held and lashed, like a yelping puppy in a hunting-field. The tale would be told in circles of all classes; it would spread like wildfire. No food so dear to the generality as gossip—above all, gossip spiced with scandal—it would be known in his club, in his clique, all over town. Monckton lost no time in detailing, at the Circle, how ‘that dare-devil De Vigne pitched into poor Vane. Some row about a woman, I don't know who; but I can

swear to the severity of the thrashing ; and he kicked him afterwards, by Jove ! he did. Somebody should send it to the papers !’

Alma was amply revenged. Castleton’s debts, his difficulties, his bad odour in general, crowned by the story of a horsewhipping that he did not dare *revenge*, made it impossible to stay, cut by every man worth knowing ; all his daily haunts, filled by old acquaintances, who either dropped him entirely, or shook him off as plainly as they could ; every house where he was wont to dine or lounge away his hours, full of the story ; Paris and London closed as effectually as though everybody had ostracized him. He did not wait his ostracism, but fearful lest law should take further cognizance of his attempted evil deed, slunk out of Paris before nightfall. . He now usually lives about the Bads ; his society is not what one of the ducal house of Tiara might reasonably expect, and they tell me there is no more dangerous hand at trapping young pigeons, and fleecing them of all their valuable feathers. It is rather an unworthy office for one of his order, but nature will out, and it will have the best of the game, and so—Vane Castleton, with a great name, a good position, and every chance to make fair running in the race of life if he had chosen ; born with the nature of the

bully, and the sharper in him, sank at last, despite all, to their level.

Arrived at the hotel in the Champs Elysées, De Vigne found, to his amazement, that it was Lord Molyneux's, and was told, in words which were black letter to him, that Mademoiselle Tresillian was not there, but had gone to the Duchesse de La Vieillecour's villa, the Diaman du Forêt, at Fontainebleau; 'every one knew the villa; Monsieur would be certain to find it; and Mademoiselle had left word that her address was to be given to anyone who called.' With which assurance the porter returned to his plate of onion soup inside his den; and De Vigne, bewildered, rode on to the *Gare* for Fontainebleau.

Minutes seemed to him hours; the train appeared to creep along its weary ironway; everything was strange to him. Her close acquaintance with the Molyneux appeared inexplicable. The letter that vowed her love to him had been written nearly two years before. Since then she might have changed; she might have loved some other; she might even have pledged herself to another man? He tortured himself with every form of dread and doubt, as the train dragged on till it stopped at Fontainebleau, the sun shining on the

quiet French town, on the stately historic castle, on the deep majestic woods that saw the loves of Henri Quatre, the beauty of Gabrielle d'Estrées, the death of the grand Condé, and the despair of the man who, abandoned alike by his Courtiers whom he had ennobled, his Marshals whom he had created, and his People whom he had rescued from the bloody fangs of The Terror, signed the act of his abdication in his favourite palace, where that child was baptized who has lived to restore his name and to ascend his throne.

The train stopped, and he went at once to the Hôtel de la Ville de Lyon, where, fifteen or sixteen years before, he remembered giving a brilliant dinner to Rose Luillhier, then first dancer of the Opéra, a gay, flippant little blonde, whom he had driven round, in a four-in-hand, by the Carrefour des Boux and Franchard to see the Roche qui Pleure, and had drunk champagne and sung Béranger songs, and enjoyed his Bacchanalia with all the joyous, careless revelry of spirits undamped and unwearied.

*Now*, Rose Luillhier was a faded, ugly, broken-down woman, who, falling through a trap-door, and ruining her beauty for ever, had been glad to keep a Mont de Piété in a small way, in a dingy, dark, loathsome hole in the Faubourg d'Enfer;

and he—he dared not trust his present; he dared not look at his future!

He inquired the way to Madame de La Vieille-cour’s maison de plaisance. It lay on the other side of the forest, to the south-west, they told him, and they had not a carriage left in the coach-house, nor a horse in the stable, there were so many pleasure parties to the forest or the palace in this month. He went to the Londres, to the Nord, to the Aigle Noir, to the Lion d’Or; all their conveyances were hired. It was a saint’s day and a holiday in Paris, and numerous parties of every grade, had come to spend the sweet spring-hours in the leafy shades, and majestic *futailles*, of Fontainebleau. He went to Nargein’s and to Bernard’s, in the Rue de France; but he could find no conveyance there. Impatient of delay, he asked how far it was to walk.

‘Mais à peu près sept kilomètres, monsieur,’ said the man of whom he inquired. ‘Voyez donc, monsieur! Vous partirez par la Barrière de Paris, suivrez le chemin de chasse jusqu’à la Batte des Aires, prendrez le sentier jusqu’au forêt du Gros Fouteau, apres cela le sentier de l’Amitie, et aux Gorges de la Solle, monsieur—’

De Vigne heard no more of the Frenchman’s voluble and bewildering directions; a fierce oath

broke from him under his breath, as three carriages swept past him. In the first sat a young Parisian *lion*, and—the woman who called herself his Wife! From under her parasol of pink silk and lace, as she leaned forward, full-blown, high-coloured, coarse, with a smile on her lips, and that vindictive triumph in her cruel eyes which he knew so well, he saw her face—that face unseen for eleven long years, since the day he had thrown her from him in the chapel at Vigne. He knew her in an instant, despite every alteration—and they were not few that time had made—and faint and sick, he reeled against the wall of Nargein's dwelling,

The Trefusis, the woman he so unutterably loathed, so fiercely hated! Was it prophetic that this fiend should for ever stand between him and the better angel of his life! She knew him, too, for she started visibly; then she leant forward and bowed to him, with a cruel, mocking, leering smile.

‘Who’s that fine man, *ma belle*?’ asked Anatole de Beauvoisier.

‘My husband!’ answered the Trefusis, with her coarse, harsh laugh.

Anatole had a great admiration for this handsome Englishwoman, yet he estimated her rightly

enough to murmur to himself, ‘Poor devil! Don’t I pity him!’

A deadly sickness came over De Vigne, and a fierce ungovernable thirst for vengeance on her entered into him. He hated her so unspeakably! That woman who stood an eternal bar between him, and love, and peace and honour!

He broke from Nargein’s foreman with a hasty *douceur*, and took the route by the *Barrière de Paris*, trusting to memory to lead him across the forest, in the direction of the *Diaman du Forêt*. He followed the hunting-path that leads to the magnificent forest of the *Grand Fouteau*. It was now after noon, and the soft golden sunlight turned to bronze the giant bolls of the old oaks. All around him was hushed in the heart of the great royal forest; and the birds were singing in the dense foliage of those shadowy avenues, that had used to echo with the bay of hounds, the ring of horses’ hoofs, the mellow notes of hunting calls, when through their sunny glades the gay courtiers of Valois, Navarre, and Bourbon had ridden for the pleasure of the *Chasse* and the *Curée*. All was silent around him, save for the musical murmur, nameless yet distinguishable, as of the coming summer breathing its life and spirit into the tender leaves, the waving grasses, and the waters of

lake and fountain, long chilled and silenced by the iron touch of the past winter. He strode along through the hunting-path, edged on one side with brushwood and on the other with the great forest trees, only thinking sufficiently of the way he went to take the paths that bore to the north-west, and struck into the Fulaci du Gros Fouteau, knowing that; by keeping to his left, he should come upon the road to Chailly, brushing his way hastily through the tangled forest-branches that had stood the sunshine and the storm of centuries. As he swung along, he glanced upwards to put aside the boughs; and—with an inarticulate cry, sprang forward.

Half sitting, half lying on the fallen trunk of a beech that had been struck by lightning a few days before, the sunshine falling down through the thick branches on her, he saw once more the woman he loved!

In another moment she was on his heart, clinging there as if no earthly power should ever part them, weeping and laughing in her agony of gladness, while he held her in his embrace, crushing her against his breast, their long caresses more eloquent than words. Then Alma raised her face to his, flushing with a bright rich glow, her arms clinging closer and closer round him:

‘ You do not doubt me now? You will never leave me—never?’

‘ Never, my God!’ And as he poured out upon her in his kisses the passion which words were too cold and tame to utter, he forgot—utterly, entirely—that cold, cruel, jeering face which had passed him but an hour before, and—forgot, also, the ties that bound him.

Their joy was too deep for tranquillity; all she cared for was to look up into his eyes; all he cared for was to drink of the fresh sweet waters of human affection; to lavish on the only thing he loved all the pent-up well-springs of his heart; to hold her there close—close, so that none could come to rob him of her a second time—the one lost to him for so long!

Do you wonder at him? Go and travel in Sahara, across that great, dreary, blinding, shadowless, hopeless plain of glaring yellow sand, where you see no living thing save the vulture whirling aloft awaiting some dead camel ere it can make its loathsome feast; travel with the thirst of the desert upon you, your throat parching, your eyes starting, your whole frame quivering with longing for the simple drop of water which your fellows fling away unvalued. When you came to the clear cool springs flowing under the friendly sha-

dows of the banyans and the palms, would you have the courage to turn away and leave the draught untasted, and go back alone into the desert to die?

It was long before they could speak of what they had both suffered, when at last she told him all, more fully than her letter had done, of Castleton's brutality, the dark fierce blood surged over his brow, and in his teeth he muttered a fierce oath.

'By Heaven! I wish I had not let him go with life!'

'What are you saying?' she whispered, where she lay folded in his arms.

He kissed the lips he would not answer:

'Do not ask! To think that dastard villain dared to lay his hand upon you wakes crime in me! My darling, my precious one! to think that brute should have ventured to lure you in his hateful toils, should have polluted your ears with his loathsome vows, should have dared to touch your little hand with his—'

He stopped; his fierce anger overmastered him. To think the dastard love, which was poison to any woman, should have been breathed on *her*, on whom he would have had the summer wind never play too rudely; to think that his hated kiss should have ventured to touch those soft warm

lips, pure as ungathered rose-leaves, which were consecrated wholly to himself!

‘Do not grieve at it!’ whispered Alma, caressingly. ‘Do not think of it. Now I have *you* I could pardon anything. When life is beautiful and God’s mercy great, one cannot harbour hard thoughts of any one? It is when we *suffer* that we could revenge.’

He pressed her closer to his heart :

‘You are better than I, my little one!’

‘No!’ she murmured passionately, ‘I am better than none ; still less than you, noble as you are in thought and in deed, in heart and in soul. Ah ! I loved and revered you before ; but since your courage, your suffering, your daring, I love you more dearly, I reverence you more sacredly than ever, my love, my lord, my husband!’

As the last word fell on his ear, De Vigne started as at a mortal wound from the steel ! That title from her lips struck him keenly, bitterly as any sword-thrust ! To have to tell her he had deceived her, to have to give a death-blow to this unsuspecting confidence, this radiant, shadowless happiness with which she clung to him, as if, now they were together, life had brought her heaven upon earth ; to have to quench the light in her sunny eyes, and tell her that another called him by that name !

The hand that held both hers trembled ; the glow faded off his face ; his heart turned sick ; how could he tell her that for two long years the secret of his life had been withheld from her—that, married, he had gone to her as a free man—that, bound himself, he had won her love—that he had gone on from day to day, from week to week, with that fatal tie unacknowledged, that dark and cruel secret unconfessed ? And she looked up in his face, as she clung to him, with such a world of worship, such eager joy in her brilliant, loving eyes, that seemed never to weary of gazing into his ! And he had to say to her : ‘ Your trust is unmerited ! I have deceived you ! ’

Unconsciously the woman, who would have perilled her life to save him a single pang, struck a yet sharper blow to the just-opened wound ! Noticing the gloom that gathered in his eyes, to dispel it, she laughed, with her old gay childlike insouciance :

‘ Yes ! in one thing I *am* better than you ; I have more faith ! You could think evil of me, but I never dreamt of doubting *you*. Yet, Sir Folko, I had stronger evidence still ! But then I trusted you, my lord, my love ! I would have disbelieved angels had they come to witness against you ; in your absence none should dare to slander you to

me; and if they had brought proofs of every force under the sun, I would have thrown them in their teeth as falsehoods and as forgeries, if they had stained *your* honour!’

She spoke, her rich low voice thrilling with that eloquence which always came to her when roused to deep emotion or to warm excitement. Yet—every one of those noble and tender words quivered like a knife in his heart! He bent his head till his brow rested on her hair; and the man, whose iron nerves had not quailed, nor pulse beat one shade quicker, before the deadly flame blazing from the thirty guns at Balaklava, shuddered as he thought, ‘How can I tell her I have deceived her!’ Unconscious of the sting which lay for him in her innocent trust, she spoke again—scorn, contempt, and haughty impatience at the memory, passing over her face, with one of those rapid mutations of expression which gave its greatest charm.

‘Oh, Granville, how I hated that woman Lord Vane sent to pretend to be your wife! She was such a bold, coarse, cruel-eyed woman, with not the trace of a lady in her, for all her showy, gorgeous dress. Who do you think she could have been? Some actress, I should fancy—should not you?—whom he paid to take the rôle, but she did it very

badly,' And Alma laughed—a low, glad, silvery laugh—at the recollection! ‘She was not much like a woman who had loved and lost you; there was not a shadow of regret, or tenderness, or softness in her when she spoke of you, and to think she should dare take *your* name—should dare presume to claim *you*! Oh! Granville, how I hated her—the coarse, audacious woman, who dared to insult us both. But I never believed her, my own dearest. Thank God my trust in you never wavered for an instant, she never tempted me even in one passing thought to disgrace you, with the doubt that that low, bad woman had ever been aught to you. Thank God, I was too worthy of your love to insult you with a thought of credence in her!—’

‘Stop, stop—for the love of Heaven—or you will kill me!’ He felt his heart would break, his brain give way, if she said another word to add to the coals of fire she was heaping on his head! Her unconscious gladness, her noble faith, seemed to brand his soul with shame and suffering, which years would never have power to efface;—to have to tell her her trust had been misplaced; to have to confess to her that this woman *was* his wife; to have to answer her with what would quench and darken all her glad and

generous faith, and, for aught he knew, turn her from him for ever.

Startled and terrified, she tried to look into his face; but his head was bent, so that she could see nothing save the blue veins swelling on his forehead.

‘What have I said—what have I done?’ cried Alma, piteously. ‘Speak to me, answer me, for Heaven’s sake!’

He did not answer her. What could he say? The veins on his temples grew like cords, and over his face stole that dead, gray pallor which had overspread it upon his marriage day. A vague and horrible terror came upon the woman who loved him. She threw her arms round his neck; she pressed her warm lips to his forehead, pale and lined with the bitter thoughts in his brain; she only thought of him then, never of herself.

‘Tell me, what *have* I said—I, who would give my life to spare you the slightest pain?’

He seized her in his arms; he pressed her against his heart, throbbing to suffocation:

‘My worshipped darling! do not speak gently to me! Hate me! Curse me! . . . That woman is my wife!’

It was told at last—the stain on his name, the curse on his life, the secret kept so long! Her face was raised to his; its fair bloom changed to

his own bloodless and lifeless pallor, her eyes wide open, with a vague, amazed horror in them. She scarcely understood what he had said ; she could not realize it in its faintest shadow.

‘Your wife!’ she repeated, mechanically, after him. ‘*Your wife!* You are jesting, you are trying me ;—it is not true!’

He held her closer to him, and rested his lips on her hair ; he could not bear to see those fond, frank eyes gaze into his with that pitiful terror, that haunting, pleading earnestness, which would not believe even his own words against him !

‘God forgive me, it *is* true!’

With a cry that rang through the forest silence, she bowed down before the blow dealt to her by the hand that she loved best. She did not weep, like most women, but the blood rushed to her face, then left it white and colourless as death. She pressed her hand upon her heart, struggling for breath, looking up in his face as a spaniel that its master had slain would look up in his, the love outliving and pardoning the death-blow.

For the moment he thought he had killed her. In an insanity of anguish he called upon her name ; he covered her blanched lips with kisses ; he vowed to God that he loved her dearer than any husband ever loved his wife ; that he hated

the woman who bore his name, whom he had left from the very altar ! He called her his own, his love, his darling; he swore never to leave her while his life lasted ; he besought her, if ever she had cared for him, to look at him, and tell him she forgave him !

She did not shrink from, but clung to, him, breathless, trembling, quivering with pain, like a delicate animal after a cruel blow.

‘Forgive you ! Yes ! What would *I* not forgive ! But—’

Her voice broke down in convulsive sobs, and she lay in his arms weeping unrestrainedly, with all the force and vehemence of her nature ; while he bowed his head over her, and his own bitter, scorching tears fell on her golden hair. He let her weep on and on. He could not speak to her ; he could only clasp her to him, murmuring broken earnest words of agonized remorse.

Once she looked up at him with those radiant eyes, from which he had quenched the light and glory :

‘You do not love her ? You cannot !’

There was her old vehemence in the question—as passionately he answered her :

‘Love her ! Great Heaven ! no word could tell how I *hate* her ; how I have hated her ever since

that cursed day when she first took my name, to stain it and dishonour it. My precious one! my hate for her is as great as my love for you; greater it cannot be!’

‘And yet—she is your wife! O God, have pity on us!’

Her lips turned white, as if in bodily pain, her eyes closed, and she shivered as with great cold.

He pressed her against his heart; great drops of suffering stood upon his brow. It was an agony greater than death to him to see the misery on her face, and to know that he had brought it there—he who would have sheltered her from every chill breath, guarded her from every touch of the sorrow common to all human kind!

‘Would to Heaven I had died before my selfish passions brought my curse on your young head,’ he muttered, as he bent over her. ‘You forgive me—but you cannot love me after I have deceived you! You cannot love me, false as I have been to truth and honour! God knows I meant no deliberate wrong. I never sought you as libertines will seek. I never knew I loved you till the day I spoke my love—the day we parted! I had gone on and on, without thinking that I lived a lie! You cannot love me after this;—nor pity me, though I have sunk so low?’

Breathless he waited for her answer—breathless and trembling, his face white as hers, his haughty lips quivering, his head bent and humbled, as he made the hardest, yet the noblest confession a proud man can ever make—‘*I was wrong!*’

She lifted her face to his, in the first bitterness of her grief her thought was of him and not of herself.

‘Love you? I *must* while my life lasts. Nothing could change me to you; if you were to err, to alter, to fall as low as man can fall, if all the world stoned and hooted you, I would cling the closer to you, and we would defy it, or endure it—*together!*’

She spoke with her old vehemence, her arms twining close about his neck, her lips soft and warm against his cheek, her eyes gazing up into his, brilliant with the love that was the life of her life; then—the passion faded from her eyes, the glow from her face; with a convulsive sob her head drooped upon her breast, and she fell forward on his arm, weeping hopelessly, wearily, agonizedly, as women in the Crimea wept over their husbands’ graves.

‘God help me! I do not know what I say! If I am wrong, tell me; if I sin, slay me—but cease to love you I *cannot!*’

## CHAPTER IX.

## THE CROWNING TEMPTATION OF A TEMPTED LIFE.

IN a few broken, earnest words, De Vigne told her the history of that fatal marriage-bond which had cost his mother's life, stained his name, banished him from his home, cursed his life with a bitter and futile regret, and now brought misery on a life dearer than his own. And it touched him deeply to see, as she listened to his story, how utterly her own sorrow was merged into her grief for *him*; her misery at all he suffered in his cruel bondage; her loathing at the thought of all he had borne for those long years, in even nominal connection with such as his wife was. It touched him deeply to see how her own wrongs faded away unremembered in her grief for him, and she was more dear, more dangerous to him in that hour of suffering, than in her gayest, sweetest, or most bewitching moments.

Wrapt in that silent communion, absorbed in the bitterness in which the first hours of their

reunion were steeped, neither heard a footfall on the forest turf, nor saw the presence of one, who, drawing near them, looked on the completion of that vengeance which had struck its first blow so many years before, and now came to deal its last. They neither saw nor heard her, till her chill, coarse, harsh tones stirred the sweet, soft air.

‘Miss Tressillian, two years ago you chose to disbelieve, or feign to disbelieve, my claims upon your lover. Ask Major De Vigne now, in my presence, if he can dare to deny that I am his lawful and wedded wife?’

With a cry of horror, Alma looked up. With a fierce oath he sprang to his feet, standing at last face to face, as he had stood at the marriage-altar with the woman whom the Church and Law had made his wife. Thus they met at last in the silent aisles of the forest; thus they met at last, those two fierce foes whom the marriage-laws assumed to hold as ‘two whom God had joined together!’ And she stood looking at him with a cruel laugh, a leering triumph in her eyes, a devilish sneer upon her lip, hating him still with a chill and ceaseless hate; while he gazed down upon her as men gazed upon the loathsome and accursed sight of the Lamia, while between them, clinging to his arm in terror, as if to shield him from the hatred of his

deadliest enemy, was the woman he loved. On the one hand, the vile mistress who had cursed his life; on the other, the better angel, which had nestled in his heart to touch all its deeper chords, and waken all its purer love.

The Trefusis looked at him, and smiled; a smile that chilled his blood as the cold gleam of a dagger in the moonlight, chills the blood of a man, waking from sweet dreams to find himself fettered and bound in the clutches of his most cruel foe.

‘Ask him, Miss Tressillian!’ she said again. ‘You disbelieved me. See if Granville de Vigne, who in bygone days used to boast very grandly of his truth and honour, dare tell you a lie before my face, and say that I am *not* his Wife.’

Cold, swift, and haughty, rushed the words to Alma’s lips, with the scorn and fire latent in her Southern nature.

‘He would not lower himself so far to your level, as even to conceal the truth. I know all!—and if the sorrow be his, the shame of his marriage rests solely upon you.’

She laughed, that coarse, harsh laugh which, with many other of the traces of her origin and her innate vulgarity, had crept out since, her aim attained, she had flung off that uncongenial

gloss and varnish of refinement which she had assumed to lure her prey.

‘You take the high hand, young lady! Well, you are wise to make the most of a bad bargain; and since you cannot be his wife, to pretend it is the more honourable post to be his mistress! I wish you joy; his love has ever been so very famous for its constancy!’

‘Woman! silence!’ broke in De Vigne, and even the Trefusis paused for the moment, and shrank from the lurid fire flashing from his eyes, the dark wrath gathered in his face. ‘Dare to breathe another of your brutal insults in her ear, and I swear your sex shall not shield you from my vengeance. You have wronged *me* enough. Your ribald jests shall never soil her purity! My love, my darling!’ he whispered passionately, bowing his head over Alma, who still clung unconsciously to his arm, her colour changing, her face full of horror, terror, loathing, at the first coarse words that had ever been spoken to her—that had ever breathed to her of shame! ‘do not heed her; do not listen to her. She is a bold, bad woman. O God, forgive me! that I should have brought you to this!’

‘Purity!’ re-echoed the Trefusis, with her cold, loud laugh. ‘Since when has that new idol had

any attraction for you? In bygone days if the external pleased your senses, I never knew you care for over-cleanliness of mind and character! How long have you began to learn platonics? The rôle will hardly suit you long, I fancy. If this pretty child like to be added to the string of your cast-off loves, it is no concern of mine, though you *are* my husband.'

His face grew white as death; he forced to stand by and hear what he worshipped, insulted thus! With a fierce gesture, forgetful of her sex, he would have struck her in his wrath, his grief, his insulted pride, his maddened anguish; but Alma caught his arm:

*'For my sake—'*

The low words, the touch of her hand, the sight of her upraised face, stood between him and his passion as no other thing on earth would have done. For 'her sake' his arm dropped. The dark blood surged over his brow; and he put his hand upon his breast, as he had done at the marriage-altar, to keep down the storm of passions raging in his heart.

'Out of my sight, out of my sight,' he muttered in his teeth, 'or by God I shall do what you will wish to your dying day undone!'

Something in the grand wrath of this tempes-

tuous and fiery nature awed and stilled even her; a dogged sullenness overspread her face; she was foiled and mastered, and for the first time her revenge was wrested from her grasp. She could not turn what he now loved from him.

At that minute light laughter, lighter footsteps, low, gay voices, broke on their ear, and through the beech-boughs of the Gros Fouteau came Madame de La Vieillecour and her party. The Duchess recognized De Vigne with surprise; she saw, moreover, that they arrived at an untimely season on a painful scene; but coming forward with her hands outstretched, she welcomed him home with pleasant fluent words of congratulation.

It was well for him that he had learnt, long years before, the first lesson society gives its pupils: to smile when their hearts are breaking, to wear a tranquil, unmoved air while the vultures gnaw at their life-strings; or he could hardly have answered the new comers, while the stormy passions, just aroused in all their fullest strength, raged and warred in his heart; while on the one side stood the woman he loved, on the other the wife he loathed!

‘Come back to dine with us,’ continued Madame de La Vieillecour; ‘the carriages are waiting.’

Alma, ma belle, you look ill; you are tired, and the sun has been too hot.'

She turned away with her gay party, talking to De Vigne, who instinctively followed, when suddenly on his ear, the clear, cold, hard tones of the Trefusis (at whom, since his last words, he had not glanced, and whom Madame de La Vieillecour had not observed in the twilight of the forest, which was growing dark, now that the sun had set) hissed through the air, arresting all:

'Granville, may I trouble you for a few words before you leave? I thought it was not usual for a husband to accept an invitation before his wife's face, in which she was not included!'

The Duchess turned quickly; the harsh and rapid English was lost on the rest of the party, but she, despite all her tact and high breeding, stared, first at the speaker, then at De Vigne.

*'Mais!—quelle est donc cette femme!'*

He did not hear her; he had swung round, his face, even to his lips, white with passion. Careless of all observers, Alma clasped both hands upon his arm:

'Do not go,' she whispered. 'Come with me. Do not stay with her, if you love me!'

For once he was deaf to her prayer; his lips quivered in torture—to have that woman, bold

bad, low, hateful, all he knew her to be, stand there and claim him as her husband! ‘A few words with me!’ he muttered deliriously. ‘Yes; we will have a few more words! By Heaven, they shall be such as you will remember to your grave.’

Alma clung to his arm, breathless, trembling, blanched with fear. ‘If you love me, do not stay! She will madden you, she will goad you to some crime! leave her to do her worst. She is beneath your vengeance!’

For the first time he was deaf to her entreaties—for the first time he would not listen to her voice. He put her hands off his arm, and answered her in the same low tone:

‘I will rejoin you. Fear nothing from me: in all I do and say while my life lasts, I shall remember *you*. Go!’

He spoke gently, but too firmly for her to resist him, and turned to the Duchess.

‘Allow me, Madame, to speak a few words with this person? I will rejoin you. You do not dine till nine?’

‘No. I will leave horses for you at the entrance of the Gros Fouteau—au revoir!’

Certain indistinct memories arose in the Duchess’s mind of a story her brother, little Curly

had told her, long ago, of some unhappy and ill-assorted marriage which De Vigne had made ; and she rapidly guessed all the truth. They went ; a turn hid them from sight, and De Vigne was alone with his wife, in the twilight deepening around them. For a moment neither spoke. Perhaps the memory was too strong in both of twelve years before, when they had stood thus, face to face, before the marriage-altar, to take the marriage vows—on one side a lie and a fraud, on the other a curse life-long and inexorable.

Alma knew him aright—this woman maddened him. She had set light to all the hottest passions in him, and they now flared and raged far beyond power of his to still them. His loathing for one who only bore his name to dishonour it, and only used the tie of wife to torture and insult him, overmastered reason and self-control, and unloosed the bonds of all that was darker and most dangerous in his character.

She looked at him and laughed, with that coarse sneer which had been on her lips when she signed her name in the chapel at Vigne.

‘So! Granville de Vigne, we have met at last! You have found my promised revenge no child’s play, no absurd bombast as you fancied it, eh? You are my husband, *my husband* “until death

us shall part.” Do you remember the sweet words of the marriage service that bound us together for life? I have driven you from your home; I have made the memory of your mother weigh on you with the weight of murder; I have cheapened your name to the world and made it hateful to you; I stand a bar, as long as you and I shall live, to your peace and happiness. You laughed once when I vowed to be revenged on you; you can hardly laugh at it now!’

‘Silence! fiend incarnate!’ burst from De Vigne, the mad agony in him breaking bounds. ‘Oh! wretch, divorced in truth, from the day we stood together at the altar, evil enough I have done to God and man, but not enough to be cursed with you!’ . . . . .

She laughed again—that coarse and brutal laugh which thrilled through his every nerve.

‘No doubt you hate me hotly enough! You want your freedom, De Vigne. You want to wash off the stain from your name. You want to go back to your lordly home without my memory poisoning the air. You want your liberty, if only on the old plea for which you used to want all things that were not easy to get, because it is unattainable. Of course you hate me! Perhaps that gold-haired child whom

I found you weeping over so pathetically, finding mere love an unprofitable connection, wants to work on you to put your freedom in *her* hands, and you would fain be quit of me, to pay down the same price again for a new passion—'

With a fierce spring De Vigne seized her in his grasp, crushing her as in an iron vice.

'Dare to say one word of her again, and I shall forget your sex! Let her alone, I tell you, or by Heaven it may be worse for you than you ever dream!'

She quailed before the passion in his voice, the strength of the grip in which he held her. But her fiendish delight in goading him to fury outweighed her fear. She laughed again:

'Sullied! polluted! I fancy your protection will do that more completely than my pity, especially when you select for your inamorata one of Vane Castleton's forsaken loves!'

An oath, so fierce, that it startled even her, stopped her in her jeering slander. The boiling oil was flung upon the seething flames, lashing them into fury. He was stung past all endurance, and the insult to the woman whom he knew as stainless as the virgin snow, goaded him to insanity; he neither knew nor cared in that moment what he did;

the blood surged over his brain, and flamed in his veins like molten fire; he gripped her in his grasp as a tiger his prey.

‘Woman, silence! Would to God you were of my sex, that I could wreak such vengeance on you as you should carry to the grave.’

Her fierce and cruel eyes laughed into his in the dull gray twilight, with leering triumph over the misery she caused.

‘It is a pity there are laws as inexorable on murder as on marriage! You would not be the first husband who killed his wife when he fell in love with another woman—’

She stopped, stricken with sudden awe and fear, at the passion she had stung, and tortured, into being. As the iron gripe of his hands clenched harder and harder upon her, for the first time it flashed upon her that she was *in his power*—the power of the man she had so bitterly wronged, and whom she had now goaded on to reckless fury and despair! She knew his fiery passions—she knew his lion-like strength—she knew his long and unavenged wrongs; and she trembled, and shivered, and turned pale in his relentless grasp, for she was in his hands, and had aroused a tempest she knew not how to allay.

‘Wretch, accursed! if you tempt me to wash

out my wrongs, and slay you where you stand, your blood will be on your own head !’

His voice, as it hissed out in the horrible whisper, sounded strange even to his own ear, his brain thrilled and throbbed, flashes of fire danced before his eyes, through which he saw, cruel and hateful, the face of his temptress—of his wife ! The pale heavens whirled around him, the giant forms of the forest trees seemed dark and ghastly shapes. His grasp tightened and tightened on her ; she had no strength against him ; her life was in his power, that life which only existed to do him hideous wrong ; that life which stood an eternal bar between him and love, and peace, and honour ; that one human life which stood barring him out from all he coveted, and which in one flash of time he could snap, and still, and destroy for ever from his path, which its presence so long had cursed.

They were alone, shrouded and sheltered in the solitude of the coming night ; in that dense forest, there were no eyes to see, no ears to listen, no voices to whisper whatever might be done under the cover of those silent beechwood shades.

That horrible hour of temptation !—coming on him when, with every passion stung to madness, his blood glowed ready to receive the poison ! The night was still around them, there was not a

sound save the sigh of the leaves; not a thing to look upon them, save the little crescent moon and the stars, which were arising slowly one by one. Night and Solitude—twin tempters—gathered round him; his heart stood still, his brain was on fire, his eyes blind and dizzy; alone, out of the gray and whirling haze around him he saw her mocking, fiendish gaze, and the voice of a fell Temptation whispered in his ear, ‘Her life is in your hands, revenge yourself. Wash out the stain upon your name, win back the liberty you crave, efface the loathsome insults on the woman you love. She stands between you and the heaven you crave—take the life that destroys your own. For your love she gave you fraud; for your trust, betrayal; for your name, disgrace. Avenge it! Is it not just? One blow, never heard, and never known by any mortal thing, and you have freedom back, and love!’

His brain reeled; his grasp tightened and tightened upon her, too strong for her to have power or movement left. The night whirled around him, the pale blue skies grew crimson as with blood, the great gnarled trunks of the trees seemed to mock and grin like horrid spirits, goading him to evil, his passions surged in madness through his veins; and clear and ghastly he seemed to hear a

tempter's voice : 'Avenge your wrongs, and you are free!'

With a cry to God, a throe of agony, he flung the fell allurements from him, and threw her from his grasp. 'Devil, temptress! thank your God, not me, I have not murdered you to-night!' She lay where he had thrown her, stunned, less by the fall than by the terror of the moment past—that moment of temptation which had seemed eternity to both. She lay there motionless, and he fled from her—fled as men flee from death or capture—fled from that crime which had lured him so nearly to its deadly brink ; which so nearly had cursed and haunted his life with the relentless terror, the hideous weight, of a human life, silenced and shattered by his hand, lain by his deed in its grave, sent by his will from its rightful place and presence in the living, laughing earth, into the dark and deadly mysteries of the tomb.

He fled from the hideous temptation which had assailed him in that hour of madness—he fled from the devil of Opportunity to which so many sins are due, and from whose absence so many virtues date: flinging it away from him with a firm hand, not daring to stay to test his strength by pausing in its presence. He fled on and on, in the twilight gloom, through the trembling leaves,

and evening shadows ; he fled on under the gaunt boughs and tangled aisles of the woodland ; dark passions warring and rioting within him. Dizzy with the whirling of his brain, every nerve strung to tension, and quivering and throbbing with the fierce torture of the ordeal past, he sank down at last as one whom the blood-hounds have chased, half conscious, on the cool fresh turf, with a cry of agony and thanksgiving : ‘ My God ! my God ! I thank thee that my hands are stainless from this sin ! ’

The silver scimeter of the young moon rose over the forest, the twilight deepened, and the night came down on Fontainebleau, veiling town and woodland, lake and palace, in its soft and hallowing light ; still he lay there, exhausted with the conflict ; worn out with that fell struggle with temptation, where submission had been so easy, victory so hard. And as the twilight shadows deepened round him, and the dews gathered thicker, and the numberless soft voices of the night chimed through the silent forest glades, he thanked God that his heart was free, his hands stainless, from the guilt, which, if never known by his fellow-men, would yet have haunted him with its horrible presence throughout his life, poisoned the purest air he breathed, turned the fairest

heaven that smiled on him into a hell, waked him from his sweetest sleep to start and shudder at the chill touch of remembered crime, and cursed his dying bed with a horror that would have pursued him to the very borders of his grave. He thanked God that for once in his life he had resisted the mad temptation of the hour, and thrust away the evil of Thought ere it had had time to fester into Deed ; he thanked God that the dead weight of a human life was not upon his soul, to rise and drive him, Orestes-like, from every haven of rest, to damn him in his softest hours of joy, to make him shrink from the light of heaven, and tremble at the rustle of the trees, and quail before the innocent and holy beauty of the earth crimsoned with his guilt. He thanked God that he could meet the innocent eyes of the woman he loved without a secret on his soul ; that he could take her hands without staining them with the guilt on his ; that he could hold her to his heart, without the deadly presence of that crime between them with which, to win her, he would have darkened earth, and burdened both their lives. He thanked God that he could stand there in the solemn aisles of the Forest and feel the wind fan his hair, and hear the sighing of the woodland boughs, and look upwards to the holy stillness of

the skies without the myriad voices of the Earth and Heaven calling on him to answer for his guilt—that he could stand there under the fair evening stars, stainless from the guilt which had tempted him in the darkest hour of his life, able to look up with a clear brow, and a fearless conscience, into the pure eyes of night!

## CHAPTER X.

## TRIED IN THE FIRE, AND PROVEN.

It is strange how the outer world surrounds yet never touches the inner; how the gay and lighter threads of life intervene yet never mingle with those that are darkest and sternest, as the parasite clings to the forest tree, united yet ever dissimilar! From the twilight gloom of the silent forest, from solitude and temptation and suffering, De Vigne passed suddenly into the glitter and glow and brilliance, the light laughter and the ringing jests, and the peopled salons of the Diaman du Forêt. From the dense woods and the stirless silence of the night, only haunted by the presence of the woman who had cursed his life, and well-nigh lured him to irrevocable and ineffaceable guilt, he came by abrupt transition into a gay and brilliant society, from which all sombre shadows were banished, and where its groups, laughing, jesting, flirting, carrying on the light intrigues of the hour, seemed for the time as though no sorrow or

suffering, bitterness or passion, had ever intruded amongst them. Strange contrast! those glittering salons, and that dark and deadly solitude of the beech woods of the Gros Fouteau—not stranger than the contrast between the face which had lured him to crime and misery, in the dense shadow of the forest gloom; and the one on which he looked as, when away from the gaiety and the gossip, the light laughter and the subdued murmur of society, he drew her, after awhile, unnoticed, out on to the terrace which overlooked the wooded and stately gardens of the Diaman du Forêt, where the moonbeams slept on lawn and lake, avenue and statue, in the calm May night, that shrouded Fontainebleau, town and palace and forest, in its silvery mist.

Neither of them spoke; neither could have found voice to utter all that arose in their hearts at the touch of each other's hand, the gaze of each other's eyes, the sense of each other's presence.

Dark and heavy upon them was the weight of that past hour. Silent they stood together in the solitude of the night that was calm, hushed, and peaceful, fit for a love either more tranquil, or more fully blessed, than theirs.

His voice was hoarse and broken as he spoke at last, bowing his head over her:

‘I have sinned before Heaven and before thee. I have fallen very low!’

She did not answer him, she only lifted her eyes to his. By the silvery gleam of the night he could see the unswerving fidelity, after all, through all, promised him for all eternity while her heart should beat, and her eyes have life to gaze upon his face.

Now he knew, never again to doubt it, how unwearyingly, and how entirely, this imperishable and unselfish love which he had won, would cling around him to his dying day. The night was still, not a murmur stirred among the trees, not a breath moved upon the surface of the little lake, not a cloud swept across the pale, pure stars, gleaming beyond in the blue heavens. The earth was hushed in deep repose, nature slept the solemn and tranquil sleep which no fret and wrath of man has power to weaken or arrest; while he, the mortal, with human love trembling on his lips, and human suffering quivering in his heart, told in broken earnest words the confession of that dire temptation which so nearly had ripened into crime. He laid his heart bare to her, with all its sins and weaknesses, its errors and its impulses, knowing that his trust was sacred, secure of sympathy, and tenderness, and pity. He spoke to her as men can

never speak to men, as they can seldom speak to women. He told her of that darker nature born in him, as more or less in all, which had slumbered unknown, till opportunity awoke it; and which then, aroused in all its force, had wrestled with all that was merciful, gentle, and better within him. He told her of that fell Tempter of Thought which had arisen so suddenly in night and solitude, and whispered him to a deed that would give him back his freedom, avenge his wrongs, and shatter the fetters that weighed him down with their unmerited burden. He told how he had fled from it, how he had conquered it, how he had escaped with pure hands and stainless soul, to render thanks to God for his deliverance, in the solemn forest-aisles of that temple, where man best meets the mystery of Deity; which human hands never fashioned, and human creeds, and follies, and priestcraft cannot enter to lower and pollute.

He told her, laying bare to her all the deadly crime begotten in his heart, and so well-nigh wrought by his hand into the black guilt with which one human life stifles and tramples out another: then, he asked her:

‘Can you love me—after this?’

She lifted up her face, that was white as death

where the light of the moon shone upon it; and her voice was low and tremulous, yet sustained with the great heroic tenderness which did not shrink from him in his sin, which did not recoil from him in his fell temptation, but which forgot and washed out its own wrong in the deep waters of an exhaustless love.

‘I shall love you while I have life! I have said it; I can say no more. Let the world condemn you—you are the dearer to *me*!’

He crushed her closer in his arms.

‘Great Heaven! Such love as yours binds us with stronger force, and consecrates holier tie, than any priestcraft can ever forge. *She* is *not* my wife. Reason, right, sense, justice, all divorced her from the very hour I left her at the altar, my bitter enemy, my relentless foe, who won me by deceit, who would have made my life a hell, who renders me a devil, not a man! *She* my wife! Great God, I renounce her!’

Alma, as the fierce words were muttered in his throat, clung to him, her voice low and dreamy, like the voice of one in feverish pain.

‘She is no wife of yours; a woman that could hate you and betray you! A woman whom you left at the altar! How can they bind you to her?’

‘They may!—*I* care not, save that she holds the name that should be yours. This was all that was wanting to fill up the measure of my hate for her. Let fools go babble of her claims upon me if they will! From the hour we parted at the altar I never saw her face until this night; from this night I divorce her before God. She is no wife of mine; her rights are mere legal quibbles, love never forged, fidelity never sanctified, God never blessed them! I claim my heritage of justice as a man—my right to live, to love, to taste the common happiness of my fellows. The very birds around us find their mates! Why are we, alone of all the earth, to be wrenched apart, and condemned to live and die asunder? Why are we, alone, to be forced to surrender all that makes life of joy and value? Alma!—surely we love well enough to defy the world together?’

He paused abruptly, his frame shook with the great passions in him, which were stronger than his strength; the words broke from him unawares—the words that would decide their fate! her face was flushed to a deep scarlet glow as he looked down on it by the silvery light of the moon, her hands closed tighter upon his, her lips quivered, and he felt her slight, delicate form tremble in his arms. She clung closer to him still, her breathing

hurried and low, like broken, rapid sighs ; her eyes, humid and dark as night, fell beneath his ; that one word, ‘together,’ stirred the depths of her heart, as the storm-winds the depths of the sea. Two years before, she would have scarce comprehended the extent of the sacrifice asked of her, more than Mignon or Haidee ; scarce known more fully than they, all it called on her to surrender. Now she knew its meaning ; knew that this man, who was thus pitilessly cursed for no crime, nor error, but simply for a *mistake*—the fatal and irrevocable mistake of early marriage—would be condemned by the world if he took his just heritage of freedom. She knew that, for a divine compassion, an imperishable love, she, who clung to him, would be laid by social law beneath a social ban, would be forbid by it from every sphere and every honour that were her due by birth, by intellect, by right. She knew her sacrifice. She knew that she should decide the destiny of her whole future ; and the proud nature, though strong enough to defy both, was one to abhor any free glance, to resent every scornful word : the haughty and delicate spirit was one to feel keenly, yielding one inch of her just place. But—she loved, and the world was far from her ; she loved, and her life lay in his. Fidelity is the marriage-bond of

God: the laws of man cannot command it, the laws of man are void without it. Would she not render it unto him, even to her grave? Would she not be his wife in the sight of Heaven? Suffering for him would be proudly borne, sacrifice to him would be gladly given. She would have followed him to the darkness of the tomb; she would have passed with him through the furnace of the fires; content, always content, so that her hands were closed on his, so that she had strength to look up to his face.

This is sin, say you? Verily, if it be so, it is the sublimest sin that ever outshone virtue!

He bent his head lower and lower, and his words were hoarse and few.

‘Can you love me—enough for this?’

He felt a shudder as of icy cold run through her frame as she lay folded in his embrace. By the white light of the moon, he saw the scarlet blush upon her face waver, and burn, and deepen; quick, tremulous sighs heaved her heart; her arms wreathed and twined closer and closer about him; her eyes gleamed with an undying and eternal love, as they met his own in the pale, soft radiance of the stars.

‘You are my world, my all! Your will is mine!’

The words were spoken that would give her to him.

The whisper died away, scarce stirring the air; the fevered flush upon her face glowed warm, then changed to a marble whiteness. She clung to him closer still; and passionate tears, born from the strong emotions of the hour, welled slowly up, and fell from those eyes which she had first lifted to his when she was a little child, flinging flowers at him in the old library at Weivehurst. She loved him, she pitied him; she would forsake all to give him back that happiness of which another's fraud had robbed him. She thought of nothing then save him; and if he had stretched out his hand and bade her follow him into the dark, cold shadows of the grave, she would have gone with him fondly, fearlessly, unselfishly, still thinking only of him; what comfort she could give, what trial share, what pain avert. She loved him. She was tried in the fire, and proven. The world, I say, was very far from Alma then—as far as the fret, and noise, and bustle of the city streets, are from the fair and solemn stars of heaven.

And in the stillness of the night their lips met. She would give up the world for him.

\* \* \* \* \*

He parted from the woman he loved, upon the

terrace that night, under the starry summer skies; he could not return to the crowded salon within; he could not join again the glitter and gaiety of French society; and he took his way across the park towards the little village of Chailly, to rest there for the few short hours which remained before sunrise.

It was now midnight; all was still as the silence of the grave about him, while he went across the great stretches of sward under the trees, with only the hoot of a night bird in his ear; or the stealing of a fox among the brush woods breaking the deep tranquillity. The awe of that great guilt which so near had been his, was still upon him; the weight of his erring past hung on him; his heart was sad and heavy, and the fruit of his own bygone madness was bitter in his teeth. His pride was bent; his iron will broken; his deep passions chastened; a chasm of crime had yawned at his feet, to leave him a humbler and a gentler man. And the bitterness of a yearning and futile remorse, a remorse which made him loathe himself, a remorse which gnawed and seared his heart like scorching fire, was on him, as he remembered across the far stretch of misspent years, his mother's prophecy:

‘You will love again; to find the crowning

sorrow of your life, or drag another in, to share your curse !’

Like the blow of a knife into open, bleeding wounds, struck a few coarse laughing words whispered in his ear, as he paced through the dense woodland in the shadows and the stillness of the midnight hour :

‘ Do you love your wife any dearer to-night, sir ; or are you thinking what a cursed mistake you made a dozen years ago ? ’

He swung round, starting like a thoro’bred under the galling and the rending of the spur ; in the moonlight solitude the words sounded like the hissing gibe of demons, mocking in his ear, and jabbering at his bondage. Close behind him, in the dim light, he saw his ex-valet, Raymond, with a laugh upon his face, as the moon shone full on it.

Stung past endurance by the impudent leer of this cur who dogged his steps even in solitude ; maddened at the words which made a brutal jest of the deadly curse upon his life, De Vigne, by sheer instinct, and without thought or pause, seized him by his throat, and flung him away from him, as men fling a dog out of their path.

‘ Hound ! learn how I bear with insolence ! ’

The man fell with a heavy crash among the

brushwood; but the ferns and gorse of the thick undergrowth tempered his fall, and with a muttered oath he gathered himself slowly up, and sprang with a light bound after De Vigne:

'Sir! sir, listen! Don't be so hasty, Major. I mean you no insult, before God I don't. I can do for you what nobody else can!' . . . . .

De Vigne motioned him aside:

'Out of my way, or I shall do you a mischief!'

But the man was undaunted, and ran beside him, to keep pace with his swift strides, panting, breathless, eager:

'Do hear me, sir, do. By Heaven, sir, I can free you from your wife!'

At the words, spoken in such an hour, De Vigne staggered as if a shot had struck him, and reeled backward against the tall moss-grown fence which ran along the borders of the park; in the gray moonlight the man Raymond saw the dark blood that stained his face, then faded, leaving it an ashy pallor, and the gesture with which his hand went to his heart, like one under the heavy suffocation of asphyxia:

'*Free! Free! O God!*' . . . . .

His voice rattled incoherently in his throat, he paused for breath, he looked up to the starlit skies with a wild appealing stare, the earth reeled

round him, his eyes swam, he wondered whether this were delirium or dream.

The man was awed and frightened at his look ; and came up to him and shook him by the arm :

‘ Sir, sir, for Heaven’s sake don’t look like that ! It’s *truth* I’m telling you. She’s not your wife, sir ! ’ . . . . .

De Vigne’s eyes turned on him with a mute, imploring, unconscious prayer ; his lips quivered, his veins swelled, his voice shook, hoarse, stifled, inarticulate : the agony of joy unnerves us more than the agony of death ! ’

‘ Not my wife ! *Not !* Good God ! you are not brute enough to lie—to hoax. . . . ’

The words died in his throat, and the man looked up at him steadily and fearlessly in the clear light slanting in through the boughs.

‘ Fore George, sir, no. I wouldn’t be such a blackguard ! ’ he said, heartily. ‘ It ain’t no lie ! I can do for you what no divorce laws can, thanks to the timorous fools that frame them. If those gentlemen were all fettered themselves, they’d make the gate go a little easier to open ! I *can* set you free, but how I won’t tell you till we come a little to terms.’

Free ! Not to Bonnevard, pining in the darkness and wretchedness of Chillon was freedom,

what it was to him. Free! The very thought maddened him with eager, impatient, breathless thirst for *certainty*. He seized the man by the shoulders in his iron grip :

‘Great Heaven! Tell me all—all; do you hear?—all!’

‘Gently, gently, Major,’ said Raymond, wincing under his grasp, ‘or I shall have no breath to tell you anything. I can set you free, sir; and I don’t wonder you wish to be rid of her! But before I tell you how, you must tell me if you will give me the proper price for information.’

De Vigne shook him like a little dog.

‘Cur! Do you think I will make a compact with such as *you*? Out with all you know, and I will reward you afterwards: out with it, or it will be the worse for you!’

‘But, Major,’ persisted the man, halting for breath, ‘if I tell you all first, what gage have I that you will not act on my information, and never give me a farthing?’

‘My word!’ gasped De Vigne, hurling the answer down his throat. ‘It is bond enough! Speak; do you hear? Is she *not* my wife?’

‘No, Sir; because!—she was mine first!’

‘*Yours*? Then—’

‘Your marriage is null and void, sir.’

As the words of his release were uttered in the hushed stillness of the midnight woodlands, De Vigne staggered against the fence, dizzy and blind as in delirium. Free! Free!—his name once more his own, purified from the taint of her claim upon it; free!—his home once more his own, purged from the dark and haunting memories of an irremediable past; free!—from the bitterness of his own folly, so long repented of in agony and solitude; free!—to recompense with honour in the sight of men, the love which would have given up all for his sake, and followed him, content, to any fate.

Breathless with his new-born hope, he leaned there in the solitude of the night, forgetful of Raymond's presence, seeing, hearing, heeding nothing, save that one word—*free!* the blood flowing with fever-heat through all his veins, every nerve throbbing with the electric shock, his whole frame trembling with voiceless thanksgiving.

He covered his eyes with his hand, like a man dazzled with the sudden radiance of a noontide sun.

‘Will you swear that?’

‘Aye, sir, on the Bible, and before all the courts and judges in the land, if you like.’

De Vigne gave one quick, deep sigh, flinging

off from him for ever the iron burden of many years :

‘ Tell me all, quick, from beginning to end, and give me all your proofs.’

He spoke with the eager, wayward, restless impatience of his boyhood ; the old light gleamed in his eyes, the old music rang in his voice. The chains were struck off; he was free !

‘ Very well, sir. I must make a long story of it. Nineteen years ago, sir, Lucy Davis was a very dashing-looking girl—as you thought, Major, at that time—and I was twenty-two, and much more easily taken in, than I was when I had seen a little more of human nature. My name was Trefusis, sir, not Raymond at all. I took an *alias* when I entered your service. My father was a Newmarket leg, and he made a good pot of money one way and another ; and he had more gentlemen in his power, and more of your peerage swells, sir, under his dirty old thumb, knowing all that he knew, and having done for ’em all that he had done, than you’d believe if I was to swear it to you. He wanted to make a gentleman of me. “ Charlie, my boy,” he used to say, “ with brains and tin you may be as good as them swells any day ; they hain’t no sort of business to look down on you. I’ve done dirty work enough to serve

them, I reckon.” He wanted to make a gentleman of me, and he gave me a capital education, and more money and fine clothes than any boy in the school. He went to glory when I was about eighteen, sir, leaving me all his tin to do just whatever I liked with, and not a soul to say me nay. I soon spent it, sir; every stiver was gone in no time. I bought horses, and jewellery, and wine. I betted, I played; in short, I made ducks and drakes with it in a very few years with a lot of idle young dogs like myself. Jimmy Jarvis—you will have heard of him, sir?—was going to have a mill with the Brownlow Boy, at Greystone Green, and I went down with two or three others to see the fight. While I was in Frestonhills, sir, I saw Lucy Davis in the milliner’s shop in High Street, and I fell straight in love with her for her great black eyes and her bright carnation colour. I went to church to see her the next day, and bowed to her; and so we got acquainted, sir, and I fell more and more in love, and I wouldn’t have stirred from Frestonhills just then to have made my fortune. That was a year after you had left, sir. But I knew nothing about *your* affair, sir, then—trust her!

‘Well! I was in love with Lucy, and she thought me a man of fashion and of fortune, and married

me; the register is in the church of Frestonhills; you can see it, sir, any day you like. In six months I thought myself a great fool for having fettered myself. Lucy's temper was horrid;—always had been—and when she found out that all my riches would soon make themselves wings and flee away, it was not softened much. She helped me to spend my money, sir, for twelve months, leading me about as wretched a life as any woman could lead a man. We lived chiefly abroad, sir, at the German Baths; then the tin was all gone, and Lucy grew a very virago; as she had taken me only out of ambition, it was a hard cut to her, I dare say, to find me a mere nobody. We parted by mutual consent; I left her at Wiesbaden, and went my own ways; she had spent every shilling I had. Some time after I was fool enough to forge a cheque; it was found out, and they shipped me off to the colonies, and Lucy was free of me. Some years after, I learnt what she did with herself; at Wiesbaden old Lady Fantyre was staying, rousing, gambling, and living by her wits, as you know she always has done, sir, ever since anybody can remember her. She saw Lucy at the Kursaal, and Lucy had improved wonderfully in twelve months; she could get up a smattering of things very fast; she could dress well on little or no-

thing ; she had quick wits, and a haughty, defiant, knock-me-down manner that concealed all her ignorance, and carried everything before her. Old Fantyre took a fancy to her ; she wanted to have a companion, somebody to make her up well for the evenings, and read her novels to her, and humour her caprices, and amuse the young fellows while she fleeced them at *écarté* or *vingt-et-un*. Lucy seemed just fit for her place. She didn't know she was married ; Lucy made herself out an unprotected girl, whom you, sir, had deserted, and old Fantyre took her into her service. Now, Lucy was uncommonly clever, hard-hearted, and sharp-sighted ; she humoured the old woman, she made herself necessary to her, she chimed in with all her sayings, she listened to all her stories, she got into her good graces, and made her do pretty well what she chose. You remember, sir, perhaps, that when you and Lucy parted at Frestonhills she told you she'd be revenged on you. She isn't a woman to *forget*. She told Lady Fantyre about you, and she induced her to think that if she could catch you and marry you, what a capital thing it would be for both of them, and how royally they could help you to spend your fortune.

‘ I must tell you, Lucy had heard that the

government ship that had taken me out to Botany Bay had foundered, and she didn't know that I and a few others had managed to drift in the jolly-boat till an American cruiser picked us up. She thought I was drowned, or else she would have been too wide awake to go in for bigamy. Clever women don't do that foolery out of novels! Old Fantyre listened, agreed, and took her to England, and introduced her as her niece. There, as you know, sir, you met her, and fell into her toils again. I don't wonder you did not know her. Years and society and dress, and the education she'd given herself, made such a difference. Four years after you had married her, I came to Europe, and went as valet to the Duc de Vermuth. I often wondered what had become of my wife; till one Sunday, when I went to the Pré Catalan, I saw a lady in a carriage, talking and laughing with a number of young fellows round her. She was a remarkably fine-looking woman, and something in her face struck me as like my wife. At that minute she saw me. She turned as white as her rouge would let her, gave a sort of scream, and stared at me. Perhaps she thought she saw my ghost. At any rate, she pulled the check-string, and drove away from me as fast as she could. Of course I didn't let her give me the slip like that. I followed her

to a dashing hotel in the Champs Elysées, and just stepped up to her, and said, "Well, old girl, how are you?" Horrible she looked—as if she longed to kill me—and, indeed, I dare say she did. She signed me not to blow on her, and said, "Not now; come at eight this evening." I went; and she told me all her story, and offered me, if I would keep quiet and tell nobody she was my wife, to go shares with me in the money you allowed her provided she lived out of England. I thought about it a little; I saw I should get nothing by proclaiming our marriage; I closed with her, and lived at my ease. But she grew screwy; she didn't pay up to time. She used to anticipate the money, and then defraud me of my share. At last it came into my head, when I heard you had come back from India, to see what sort of gentleman you were, and whether you wanted your freedom bad enough to pay me a high price for it. You required a valet. I entered your service; and when I was sent down to Richmond with the parrot and the books and the flowers, and so on, for that little lady—no, Major, don't stop me, I mean no offence to her—I thought the time would soon come, when you'd give *any* price for your freedom, for I heard plenty of talk, sir, at that time, about you and her; servants trouble themselves more about their

master's business than they do about their own. The day you dismissed me from your service, I was going to tell you, if you had only listened. But you were so impatient and so haughty, that I thought I'd let you go on in ignorance, and free yourself, if ever you wanted, as best you might. I entered Lord Vane Castleton's service then. You know he was gone quite mad about Miss Tressillian. It seems, sir, he had been very good friends with Lucy in Paris, and he wrote and told her you were in love again, and with somebody who, he thought, didn't know you were married, and that if she wished to put a stop to it, she should come over and tell the young lady. Over she did come, saw him first, and then went to St. Crucis; and after she'd been—I didn't know she was in London—he sent me to bring Miss Tressillian to Windsor, while you were sitting in court-martial on Mr. Halkett. Mine was a dirty job, sir, I know, and a rascally one. Don't look at me so fiercely, Major, for God's sake! I am sorry I did it now, for she'd sweet blue eyes, that lady, and I was never quite easy till I knew she'd got out of Lord Vane's clutches. Then you went to the Crimea, and Lucy paid worse and worse. At last I thought I would try you again, if only to spite Lucy, who was living in splendour, and grudging

me every shilling. I wrote to you at the Crimea—I tried to speak to you in the Rue Lafitte—finally, I tracked you here. Now I've told you all, Major. I know you well enough to know your word is as sure a bond as another man's cheque; and if you'll go with me, sir, to Trinity Church, Frestonhills, I'll show you the register of my marriage, which makes yours null and void.'

And thus in the hush around, only broken by the sigh of the wind, or the sweep of a night bird, he heard the history which set him free. His arm was wound about the stem of a tree nigh, for he was dizzy like a man after a mortal blow; he shaded his eyes with his hand; his lips moved silently in voiceless prayer to God, and whispers to the woman whom he loved; his breathing came short and thick; his whole frame trembled like a woman's. The ecstasy of that hour! No criminal, condemned to death and suddenly reprieved, felt the warm rush of fresh air welcoming him as he issued—a free man—from the darkness of his prison-cell of doom; with more bewildering joy, than he now felt; his liberty from the festering and bitter chains which so long had dragged upon him—his liberty from the weary weight, the repented folly, the bitter curse of Early Marriage.

He was silent, breathing fast and loud, strug-

gling to realize his freedom from his bondage. Then—he threw back his head with a proud, joyous gesture; he looked up to the brilliant summer stars shining above his head; he drew in with a deep long breath the free sweet air that streamed around him. He turned his eyes upon the man, flashing with their old, shadowless light:

‘Right! I would pay *any* price for freedom. Let us go to-night to England. I will not lose an hour—a moment!’

## CHAPTER XI.

## FREED FROM BONDAGE.

FRESTONHILLS, unchanged, lay nestling among the green pastures and fresh woods of Berkshire, and all the old familiar places struck strangely on him as he passed them on the morrow. There flowed the silver Kennet, bright and rapid as of old, rushing on its swift sunny way past the wild luxuriant hedges; and through the quiet country towns and villages. There, on its banks, were schoolboys lying among the purple clover and under the fragrant hawthorns, as poor little Curly had done long years ago. There were the dark palings, and the forest-trees of Weivelhurst, long changed to other hands before its rightful owner was laid to rest, his grave marked only by a simple wooden cross, under the southern skies of Lorave. There, against the blue heavens, rose above its woods the grey pinnacles of the old house where Alma Tressillian had made the roof ring with her childish laughter, playing under the golden laburnums that

flung the same shadows on the lawn, now, as then. There was the old Chancery, its gable roofs and its low ivy-grown walls; as he passed a lady glanced up, gardening among her geraniums and heliotropes—it was Miss Arabella—the ringlets very gray now! A little farther on, in the old playing-field, there were the wickets, and the bats, and the jumping poles, and four or five boys, in their shirt sleeves and their straw hats, enjoying their half-holiday, as we had done before them. So life goes on; when one is bowled out, another is ready to step into his shoes, and, no matter how many the ball of death may knock over, the cricket of life is kept up the same, and players are never wanting!

The register lay on the table, under the arched Norman window of the vestry of the church where, twenty years before, we had fidgeted through the dreary periods of the rector's cruel sermon full an hour long, and cast glances over our hymn-books at the pastrycook's pretty daughters.

The great old register, ponderous and dusty, lay on the table, the sunbeams from the stained glass above, falling on its leather binding and its thickly-written leaves, full of so many records of man's joy and sorrow, crowded with so many names which now were empty sounds; penned by so many

hands which were now crumbled to dust under the churchyard sods near by. The great register lay on its table in the dark, quiet, solitary vestry—the last he had seen was the one in which he had signed his doom, twelve years before, in the church at Vigne. The old sexton unlocked the book, and with shaking, infirm hand turned over the leaves one after the other. De Vigne leant against the table, watching for the entry, his breath short and laboured, his pulse beating, a mist before his eyes, a great agony of dread—the dread of *deception* tightening his heart, and oppressing him to suffocation. If the man's story were not true!—if this, too, were a hoax and a fraud! Breathless, trembling in every limb with fear and hope, he bent over the book, pushing the old man's hand away; his agony of impatience could not brook the slow and awkward fumbling of leaf after leaf, by the palsied feebleness of age. He thrust the pages back, one after another, till he reached the year 18—. Entry after entry met his eye; from lords of the manor, their ancestral names dashed across the page; from poor peasants, who could only make their mark; from feminine signatures, trembling and illegible; marriage after marriage met his eager glance, but not yet the one which was to loosen his fetters and set him

free. He turned the leaves over, one after the other, his heart throbbing thick with wild hope and irrepressible fear. At last, the setting sun, shining in through the rich hues, the rubies and the ambers, the heads of saints, and blazoned shields, on the stained window above his head, flung radiant colours on one dim yellow sheet, illumining with its aureole of light the two signatures he sought—the words that gave him ransom—the names that struck off his chains—

CHARLES TREFUSIS.

LUCY DAVIS.

And as his eyes fell upon the page which freed him from the wife who had so long cursed his life, and stained his honour, and made his name abhorrent in his sight because she bore it, De Vigne staggered forward, and, flinging the casement open, leant out into the calm, fresh evening, stunned by his sudden deliverance as by some mortal blow, and gasping for breath, while the warm westerly wind swept over him, like a man who has escaped from the lurid heat of fire into the pure, sweet air of a breaking dawn.

He was FREE! The life which he had so madly sought to spend like water, and fling off from him as an evil too bitter to be borne, among the jungles of Scinde and on the steppes of the Crimea,

was once more rich, and precious, and beloved ;— he learned at last what his wayward nature had been long ere it would believe, that the fate we deem a curse, is oftentimes an angel in disguise, if we wait patiently for the unfolding of its wings from the darkness which enshrouds them.

## CHAPTER XII.

## NEMESIS.

Two days after there was a fête given at Enghien, at the princely maison de plaisance of an English Earl—a stout, bloated old man, lavish as the wind, and rich as a Russian, who, consequently, had all the most seductive Parisiennes to make love to him; Dalilah caring very little who her Samson be, provided she can cut off his locks to her own advantage. The fête was of unusual magnificence, and the Empress of it was ‘the Trefusis,’ as we call her, ‘that poor fellow De Vigne’s wife—a very fast lot, too,’ as men in general called her—‘ma Reine,’ as the Earl of Morehampton called her, in that pleasant familiarity which she ever readily admitted to those good friends of hers, who emptied half the Palais Royal upon her in bijouterie, jewellery, and other innocent gifts of amity;—a familiarity that always stopped *just* short of the divorce court, over the water. The Trefusis reigned at Enghien, and remarkably well she looked in her sovereignty, her jewelled ivory

parasol handle for her sceptre, and her handsome eyes for her *droit de conquête*. Only three nights before she had lain on the dank grass in the Royal Forest, where the mad agony of a man, whom she had goaded and taunted, had flung her off, bidding her thank God, not him, he had not murdered her in that ghastly temptation. Only three nights before! but to-day she sat under the limes at Enghien, the very memory of that hour cast behind her for evermore, save when she remembered how she had jeered, how she had triumphed—remembered in gloating glee, for her victim could not escape her snare! The Trefusis had rarely looked better—never felt more secure in her completed vengeance upon De Vigne, her omnipotent sway over Morehampton, and all her lordly clique, than now. She was beautifully rouged, the carnation tint rich and soft, and defying all detection; her black Chantilly lace sweeping around her superb form; a parure of amethysts glittering in her bosom, as she drove down to the villa in the Earl's carriage, and reigned under the limes in dominance and triumph, as she had reigned since the day she had first looked at her own face in the mirror, and sworn by that face, to rise, and to revenge.

In brilliant style Morehampton had prepared to

receive her, for he admired the quasi-milliner of Frestonhills more than anything else, for the time being, to the extreme rage of La Baronne de Bréloques, Mademoiselle Céleste Papillon of the Français, and many other fair Parisiennes. There was the villa itself, luxurious as Eugène Sue's; and there were grounds with alcoves, and statues, and rosieries; there was a ‘pavillon des arts,’ where some of the best cantatrici in Paris sang like nightingales; there was a déjeuner, with the best cookery in France—who can say more?—there were wines that would have made Rahab or Father Mathew swear, with Trimalchio, ‘Vita vinum est;’ there were plenty of men, lions, littérateurs, and milors Anglais, who were not bored here, because they could say and do just what they pleased, with no restraint upon them whatever. And there were plenty of women (very handsome ones, too, for the Earl would never have wasted his invitations on plain faces), who smoked, and laughed at *grivoises* tales, and drank the Johannisberg and the Steinberg very freely for such dainty lips, and imitated us with their *tranchant* manners, their slang, and their lionneism, in everything except their toilettes, which were exclusively feminine in their brilliance and voluminous extent.

The déjeuner was over, during which the noble Earl, as his friends in the Upper House termed him, when they were most politely damning him, was exceedingly devoted to the Trefusis, and thought he had never seen anything finer than those admirably-tinted eyes and beautifully-coloured cheeks. He did not care for your nymphs of eighteen, they were generally too shy and too thin for his taste; he liked *bien conservées*, full-blown, magnificent roses, like the ex-milliner. The déjeuner was over, at which the Trefusis had reigned with supreme contentment, laughed very loudly, and drank champagne enough for a young cornet just joined; at which old Fantyre had enjoyed the pâtés de foie gras and other delicacies, like an old *gourmette* as she was, told dirty stories in broad Irish-French, and chuckled in herself to see gouty old Morehampton playing the gallant; and at which Mademoiselle Papillon could have fainted with spite, but not willing to give the detested Englishwoman so enormous a triumph, resisted her feelings with noble heroism.

The déjeuner was over, and the guests had broken up into groups, dispersing themselves over the villa and its grounds. The Trefusis and Morehampton took themselves to the Pavillon des Arts; but, after hearing one song from the

‘Traviata,’ Ma Reine was bored—she cared nothing for music—and she threw herself down on a seat under some linden-trees to take ice, listen to his private band, which was playing close by, and flatter him about his new barouche, which she knew would be offered her as soon as she had praised it. It was by such gifts as these she managed to eke out her income, and live *au premier* in the Champs Elysées. Morehampton flung himself on the grass at her feet, forgetful of gout and lumbago; other men gathered round her; she was ‘a deuced fine woman,’ they thought, but, ‘by George! they didn’t envy De Vigne.’ The band played valse and Béranger airs; the Earl was diverted between admiration of the black eyes above, and rueful recollections of the damp turf beneath, him; Mademoiselle Papillon made desperate love to Leslie Egerton, of the Queen’s Bays, but never missed a word or a glance that went on under the lime-trees for all that, with that peculiar double set of optics and oral nerves with which women seem gifted. Very brilliant, and pleasant, and lively, and Watteau-like it all was; and, standing under an alcove at some little distance, mingling unnoticed with the crowd of domestics, stood Raymond, *alias* Charles Trefusis, come to claim his wife, as he had been bound to

do on receipt of De Vigne's reward—none the less weighty a one, you may be sure, because the man had been given only a promise, and not a bond. De Vigne's honour in those matters was in exact inverse ratio to the world's.

‘By Jove! sir,’ the fellow whispered to me—I had come with him to see he kept good faith, and did not give us the slip—‘just look at her, what a dash she cuts, and what a fool she’s making of that old lord! That’s Lord Morehampton, ain’t it, sir? I think I remember him in Pall Mall. I suppose Lucy’s bewitched him. Isn’t she a wonderful woman, sir! Who’d think, to see her now, that she was ever the daughter of a beggar-woman, and a little milliner girl at Frestonhills, making bonnets and dresses for parsons’ wives!’

I looked at her as he spoke, and, though it seemed wonderful to him, it did not seem wonderful to me. Lucy Davis’s rise was such a rise as Lucy Davis was certain to make, favoured by opportunity as she had been—neither more nor less of a rise than a hard-headed, unscrupulous, excessively handsome woman, determined to push her way, and able to take the best possible advantage of every turn of the wheel, was pretty sure to effect. She could not make herself a gentlewoman—she could not make herself a wo-

man of talent or of ton. She was merely what she had been for the last dozen years, with the aid of money, dress, and assurance—a dashing, handsome, skilful intrigante, whose magnificence of form made men forget her style, and whose full-blown beauty made them content with the paucity of ideas, and the vulgar harshness of tone, in the few words which ever passed her lips, which were too wise to essay often, that sure touchstone of mind and education—conversation.

Raymond stood looking at her, a cunning, malicious gleam of satisfaction in his little light eyes. His wife had made a better thing of life than he; he detested her accordingly; he had many old grudges to pay off against her for bitter, snarling words, and money flung to him, because she feared him, with a sneer and an invective; he hated her for having lived in clover, while he had not even had a taste of luxury, save the luxuries of flunkeyism and valetdom, since they parted, and he enjoyed pulling her up in the midst of her glories with such malignant pleasure as was natural to his disposition. She had married him at two-and-twenty; she had made him repent of it before the honeymoon was out; she had played her cards since to her own glorification and his mortification; there was plenty in all that to give him no

little enjoyment in throwing her back, with a jerk, in the midst of her race. He stood looking at her with a peculiar smile on his lips. I dare say he was thinking what a fool he had been to fall in love with the black-eyed milliner of Frestonhills, and what a far greater fool still was his lordship of Morehampton to waste so much time and so much money, such wines, such jewellery, and such adoration, on this full-blown rose, whom no one ever tried to gather, but they impaled themselves upon her dexterously moss-hidden thorns.

At last the Trefusis, tired of ices, cancons, and Morehampton's florid compliments, rose to go into the house, and look at some Rose Du Berri vases that had belonged to Madame de Parabère; Morehampton sprung to his feet with boyish lightness and gallant disregard of the gout, and then—her husband stepped forward; and I doubt if Nemesis, though she often took a more imposing, ever assumed a deadlier guise than that of the *ci-devant* valet!

The Trefusis gave an irrepressible start as she saw him; the colour left her lips; her cheeks it could not leave. She began laughing and talking to Morehampton hurriedly, nervously, incoherently, but there was a wild, lurid gleam in her eyes, restless and savage. Her husband touched

his hat submissively, but with a queer smile still on his face :

‘I beg your pardon, my lord, but may I be allowed to relieve you of the escort of my wife?’

Morehampton twisted himself round, stuck his gold glass in his eye, and stared with all his might; the men crowded closer, stroking their moustaches in curiosity and surprise; the English women, who could understand the speech, suspended the spoonfuls of ice that were en route to their lips, and broke off their conversation for a minute; the Trefusis flushed scarlet to her very brow, her eyes scintillated and glared like a tigress just stung by a shot that inflames all her savage nature into fury—ever ready with a lie, she clung to Morehampton’s arm :

‘My dear lord! I know this poor creature very well; he is a lunatic—a confirmed lunatic—a harmless one quite; it is one of his hallucinations that every woman he sees and admires is his wife, who ran away from him, and turned his brain with her infidelity. He is harmless—at least I have always heard so—but pray tell your servants to take him away. It is very horrible!’

It was an admirably-told falsehood!—told, too, with the most natural ease, the most natural compassion imaginable—and it passed muster

with Morehampton, who signed to two of his lacqueys.

‘Seize that fellow and turn him out of the grounds. How did he get in, Soames? Go for some gendarmes if he resist you,’ said the Earl, aloud : then bent his head, and added (*sotto voce*), ‘How grieved I am, dearest, that you should be so absurdly annoyed. What a shockingly stupid fellow! Brain turned, you say — and for a wife?’

But Raymond signed off the two footmen, who were circling gingerly round him like two dogs round a hedgehog, not admiring their task, having a genuine horror of lunacy, and being enervated, probably, by the epicureanisms of plush-existence.

‘That is a pretty story, my lord, only, unfortunately, it isn’t *true*. Ben trovato—but all a hum-bug! I am as sane as anybody here; much too sane to have my brain turned because my wife ran away from me. Most men would thank their stars for such a kind deliverance! I am come to claim mine, though, for a little business there is to be done, and she is on your arm, my lord. She married me nineteen years ago, and made me repent of it before a month was out.’

‘Dear, dear! how absurd, and yet how shock-

ing! Pray send him away,’ whispered the Trefusis, clinging to the Earl’s arm, looking, it must be confessed, more like a demon than a divinity, for her lips were white and twitching savagely, and the spots of rouge glared scarlet.

‘Do you hear me, fellows? Turn that impudent rascal out!’ swore Morehampton.

‘That fellow’s wife! Why, she’s De Vigne’s wife. Everybody knows that!’ muttered Leslie Egerton, sticking his glass in his eye. ‘Saw him married myself, poor wretch!’

‘*Mais qu’est-ce que c’est donc?*’ asked Mademoiselle Papillon, edging herself in with a dim delicious idea that it was something detrimental to her rival.

‘Kick him out!’ ‘Turn him out!’ ‘An escaped lunatic!’ ‘Impertinent rascal!’ ‘*Ma foi! qu’a-t-il donc!*’ ‘*Mais comme c’est extraordinaire!*’ ‘*Dieu! qu’est-ce que cela veut dire!*’ resounded on all sides from Morehampton’s guests and the Trefusis’s adorers.

‘Major de Vigne’s wife?’ repeated Raymond. ‘No, she’s not, gentlemen: he knows it now, too, and thanks Heaven for it. She married me, as I say, nineteen years ago; more fool I to let her! *Twelve* years ago she married Major de Vigne. So you see, my lord, she is my wife, not his, and

I believe what she has done is given a nasty, coarse, impolite term by law. What I tell you is quite true. Here's Captain Chevasney, my lord, who will tell you the same, and tell it better than I. Come, old girl, you've had a long holiday; you must come with me and work for a little while now.'

He spoke with a diabolical grin, and, thus appealed to, I went forward and gave Morehampton as succinctly as I could the outlines of the story. The Trefusis's face grew gray as ashes, save where the rouge remained in two bright crimson spots fixed and unchanged, her eyes glittered in tiger-like fury, and her parasol fell to the ground, its ivory handle snapped in two as her hands clenched upon it, only with a violent effort restraining herself from flying at mine or her husband's throat. For the first time in her life, the clever Greek had her own marked card turned against her; her schemes of malice, of vengeance, of ambition, were all swept away like cobwebs, never to be gathered up again. De Vigne was free, and she was caught in her own toils!

She swung round, sweeping her black Chantilly lace round her, and scattering her sandal-wood perfume on the air, laughing:

‘And do you believe this cock-and-bull story, Lord Morehampton?’ Her voice came out in a low, fierce hiss, like a serpent’s, while her large, sensual, ruby lips curled and quivered with impotent rage. ‘Do you believe this valet’s tale, bribed by a man who would move heaven and earth to prove his lawful marriage false, and the corroborating story told so glibly by a gentleman who, though he calls himself a man of honour, would swear black were white to pleasure his friend?’

‘Come, come, there, my lady!’ laughed Raymond. ‘Wait a bit. Don’t call us bad names. You can’t ride the high horse any more like that, and if you don’t take care what you say we’ll have you up for libel; we will, I assure you. Come, you used to be wide-awake once, and if you don’t keep a civil tongue in your head it may be the worse for you.’

‘Lord Morehampton, will you endure this? I must appeal,’—began the Trefusis, turning again to that Noble Earl, who, with his double eyeglass in his eye, and his under-lip dropped in extreme astonishment, was too much amazed, and too much annoyed, at such an unseemly and untimely interruption to his morning fête to take any part in the proceedings whatever. He

was a little shy of her, indeed, and kept edging back slowly and surely. She was trembling now from head to foot with rage at her defeat, terror for the consequences of the esclandre, mad wrath and hatred that her prey had slipped from her leash.

Her husband interrupted her with a coarse laugh, before she could finish her sentence.

‘ You appeal to your *cavalier servente*, madame ? Oh ! if my Lord Morehampton likes to protect you, *I* have no objection ; it will take a good deal of trouble off my hands, and I only wish him joy of his bargain. And next time, Lucy, make sure your chickens are hatched before you begin to count them ! ’

At so summary a proposition from a husband, the Earl involuntarily drew back, blank dismay visible on his purple and supine features. The offer alarmed him ! The Trefusis was a deuced handsome woman, but she was a deuced expensive one too, thought he, and he hardly desired to be saddled with her pour toujours. Added to his other expenses, for a permanence, she would go very near to ruin him, not to mention tears, reproaches, and scenes from many other quarters ; and ‘ she is a very vixen of a temper ! ’ reflected his lordship, wisely, as he edged a little further

back, and left her standing alone—who is not alone in defeat?

The Trefusis looked round on the crowds as they hung back from her, with a scathing, defiant glance, her fierce black eyes seeming to smite and wither all they lit on; great savage lines gathered round her mouth and down her brow, that was dark with mortification and impotent chained-up fury. She glanced around, her lips twitching like a snared animal's, her face ashy gray, save where the crimson rouge burned in two oval patches, flaring there like streaks of flame, in hideous contrast to the deathly pallor of the rest. She was defeated, outdone, humiliated; the frauds and schemes of twenty years fruitless and unavailing in the end; her victim free, her enemies triumphant! She glared upon us all, till the boldest women shrank away terrified, and the men shuddered as they thought what a fiend incarnate this their ‘belle femme’ was! Then she gathered her costly lace around her. To do her justice, she was game to the last!

‘Order my carriage!’

She was beaten, but she would not show it; and to her carriage she swept, her rich Chantilly gathered round her, her silks rustling, her

perfume scenting the air, her trained dress brushing the lime-blossoms off the lawn, her step stately and measured, her head defiantly erect; leaving on the grass behind her the fragile ivory handle, symbol of her foiled vengeance,—her impotent wrath—her dethroned sovereignty. There was a moment's silence as she swept across the lawn, her tall Chasseur, in his dashing green and gold uniform, walking before her, her two footmen with their long white wands behind, and at her side, dogging her footsteps, with his sneer of retribution and his smile of vengeance, the valet who had claimed her as his wife. There was a moment's silence; then the tongues were loosened, and her friends, and her rivals, and her adorers spake.

‘Gad!’ quoth my Lord of Morehampton, ‘she looked quite ugly, ’pon my soul she did, with those great rouge spots on her cheeks. Curse it! how deuced shocking!’

‘*Mon Dieu, milor,*’ sneered Mademoiselle Papillon, ‘I congratulate you! Perhaps you will take the rôle of the *third* husband?’

‘Better go and be Queen of the Greeks—deuced sharp woman!’ said Lee Philipps.

‘Always said that creature was a bad lot. Plucky enough, though!’ remarked Leslie Egerton;

with his cigarette in his teeth. ‘What a jolly thing for De Vigne! Prime, ain’t it?’

‘The biter bit!’ chuckled old Fantyre. ‘Well, she was very useful to me, but she was always a bad lot, as you say, Leslie; horrid temper! She should have managed her game better. I’ve no patience with people who don’t make sure of their cards! Dear, dear! who’ll read me to sleep of a night?’

And the others all crowded round me, dirty old Fantyre peering closest of all, with her little bright, cunning, inquisitive eyes:

‘Come, tell us, Chevasney, is it true?’

‘I say, old fellow, what’s the row?’

So the world talks of us, either in our sorrows or our sins! They were full of curiosity, annoyance, amusement—as it happened to affect them individually; none of them stopped to regret the great lie, to remember the great wrong, to grieve for the debased human nature, and the bitter satire on the Holy Bond of Marriage, that stood out in such black letters in the new story which I added to their repertoire of scandals. *Cancans* amuse us; we never stop to recollect the guilt, the sorrow, or the falsehood that must give them their foundation-stone, their colouring, and their flavour!

Mademoiselle Papillon was perchance nearest of all to the moral of the scene, when she shrugged her little plump shoulders:—

‘ Who would ever dare marry ! It is a lottery in which all draw blanks. In love, one is an angel ; in marriage, a fiend ! Paf ! who would risk one’s neck in its halter ! ’

## CHAPTER XIII.

## VALETE.

THE spring sunshine which lit up the sparkling wines, and glittering toilettes, and gorgeous liveries of the fête at Enghien, shining on the Trefusis's parure of amethysts, and on the rich scarlet rouge of her cheeks—that flag of defiance which flaunted there in defeat as in victory!—shone at the same hour through the dark luxuriant foliage of the chesnuts at the Diaman du Forêt in Fontainebleau, on the lilac-boughs heavy with massed blossom, on the half-opened rosebuds clinging round the woodwork of the antique walls, and on the swallow's nest nestled under the broad shadow of the eaves. A warm amber light lay on the earth, and in it the gnats were whirling at their play, and the early butterflies fluttering their saffron wings; whilst the distant chimes of a church clock afar off, were ringing the quarters slowly, on the stillness which nothing broke. And out on the dark oaken sill

of one of the windows, drooping her head upon her hands, while the light flickered down upon her hair through the network of the leaves, leant a woman, alone; heedless, in the depth of her own thought, of the play of the south wind, or the songs of the birds, as both made music about her. She was alone, nothing near her save the bee droning in the cup of the early rose, or the yellow butterfly that settled on her hair unnoticed. Her head was bent, resting on her hand; her face was very pale, save when now and then a deep warm flush passed over it, suddenly to fade again as quickly; her eyes were dark and dreamy, with a yearning tenderness; and on her lips was a smile, mournful yet proud, as, half unconsciously, they uttered the words of her thoughts aloud: 'I will not leave thee, no, nor yet forsake thee. Where thou goest, I will go; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God!'

They were the words of an oath—an oath to whose keeping she would dedicate her life, even though, to so keep it, that life should be in the world's eyes condemned and sacrificed. She leant there, against the dark woodwork, alone, the silence unbroken that reigned about her, save when the wind swept through the fragrant branches above, or the rush of a bird's delicate wings cleft

the air. Suddenly—in the stillness, while yet it was so distant that no other ear could have heard it—she caught a footfall, while its sound was so faint that it did not break the silence, as the spaniel catches the step of his master while yet afar off. She lifted her head with the wild, eager grace that was as natural to her as its freedom to a flower, her eyes growing dark and humid in their expectancy, her colour changing swiftly with the force of a joy so keen that it trenched on anguish, with the hot vivid flush of a love strong as the life in which it was embedded and entwined. Then, with a low, glad cry, Alma sprang, swift as an antelope, to meet him, and to cling to him, as she would have clung to him through evil and adversity, through the scorch of shame and the throes of death, through the taunts of the world, and the ghastly terrors of the grave.

For many moments De Vigne could find no words even to tell her that which she never dreamed of, that which panted on his lips; he held her in his arms, crushing her in one long, close embrace, meeting as those meet who would not spend one hour of their lives asunder. For many moments he bent over her, speechless, breathless, straining her madly to him, spending on her lips the passion that found no fitting utterance in words; then,

stifled and hoarse in its very agony of joy, his voice broke out :—

‘ You will be my wife—this day—this hour !  
Alma!—thank God with me—I am free !’

\* \* \* \* \*

The day stole onward ; faintly from the far distance swung the silvery sound of evening bells ; the low south winds stirred amongst the lilac-blossoms, shaking their rich fragrance out upon the air ; the bees hummed themselves to slumber in the hearts of folded roses ; the mellow amber light grew deeper and clearer, while the day was passing onward, ere long to sink into night. And as the rays of the western sun through the parted network of the leaves fell about his feet, shining in the eyes of the woman he loved, and bathing her hair in light where it swept across his breast, De Vigne bowed his head in thanksgiving ; not alone for the joy in which his life was steeped, not alone for his freedom from his deadly curse, but for that hour, past yet still so near ; so near that still he sickened at it, as men at the memory of some horrible death they have but by a hair’s breadth escaped. That hour when, for the first time in all his wayward, headlong, vehement manhood, he had *resisted* ; and flung off from him the crime which, yielded to but for one fleeting in-

stant, would, though never tracked or known by man, have made him taste fire in every kiss, quail before the light of every day, and start in the sweat of agony, and the terror of remembered guilt from his sweetest rest, his most delicious sleep. That hour in the forest solitude, when, goaded, taunted, reviled, maddened, he had been face to face with what he loathed, parted by her from what he loved, yet had had strength to fling her from him, unharmed and unchastised—That hour which had been the crowning temptation of his life when he had had force to cast it behind him with a firm hand, and to flee from it—*fearing himself*, as the wisest and holiest amongst us, need do in those dark hours which come to all, when there is but a plank between us and the fathomless abyss of some great guilt.

And while the starlit night of the early summer stole onwards towards the earth, De Vigne bowed his head over the woman who had cleaved to him through all, and looking backward to his Past, thanked God.

## CHAPTER XIV.

ADIEU AU LECTEUR !

THE history is told ! It is one simple enough and common enough in this world, and merely traces out the evil which accrued to two men in similar circumstances, although of different temperaments, from that error of judgment—an Early Marriage. Both my friends took advantage of their liberty, you see, to tie themselves again ! I *don't* say in that respect, 'Go thou and do likewise,' ami lecteur, if you be similarly situated, but rather, if you are free—keep so ! A wise man, they say, knows when he is well off !

In 'The Times' the other day, I read among the deaths, 'At Paris, in her ninety-seventh year, Sarah, Viscountess Fantyre.' Gone at last, poor old woman, under the sod, where shrewdness and trickery, rouge and trump cards, are of no avail to her, though she held by them to the last. She died as she had lived, I hear, sitting at her whist-

table, be-wigged and be-rouged, gathering her dirty, costly lace about her, quoting George Selwyn, dealing herself two honours and six trumps, picking up the guineas with a cunning twinkle of her monkeyish eyes, when Death tapped her on the brain, and old Fanytre was carried off the scene in an apoplectic fit; while her partner, the Comte de Beaujeu, murmured over his *tabatière*, ‘Peste! Death is horribly ill-bred; he should have let us played the conqueror!’

What memoirs the old woman might have left us; dirty ones, sans doute, but what memoirs of intrigues, plots, scandals, schemes; what rich glimpses behind the cards, what amusing peeps beneath the purple! A great many people, though, are glad, I dare say, that the Fanytre experiences are not down in black and white, and no publisher, perhaps, would have been courageous enough to risk their issue. They would have blackened plenty of fair reputations had their gun-powder burst; they would have offended a world which loves to prate of its morals, cackle of its purity, and—double-lock its chamber-doors; they would have given us keys to many skeleton cupboards, which we should have opened, to turn away more heart-sick than before!

Her protégée, the Trefusis, has in no wise gone

off the scene, nor did she consent to drop down into a valet's wife. Her exposure at Morehampton's villa had been the most bitter thing life could have brought her, for she had read enough of Rochefoucauld to think with him, 'le ridicule déshonore plus que le déshonneur.' She sought the friendly shadow of Notre Dame de Lorette. Fearing her husband no longer, she bribed him no more; and if you like to see her any day, walk down the Rue Bréda, or look out in the Pré Catalan for a carriage with lapis-lazuli liveries, dashing as the Montespan's, and you will have pointed to you in a moment the full-blown magnificence (now certainly coarse, and I dare say only got up at infinite trouble from Blanc de Perle and Bulli's best rouge) of the quasi-milliner of Frestonhills. She has at present, *en proie*, a Russian prince, and thrives upon roubles. Her imperial sables are the envy of the Quartier; and as women who range under the Piratical Flag don't trouble their heads with a Future, the Tre-fusis does not stop to think that she may end in le Maison Dieu, with a bowl of soupe maigre, when her beauty shall utterly have lost all that superb and sensual bloom which lured De Vigne in his hot youth to such deadly cost.

'A young man married is a man that's marred.'

How can the man fail to be so, who chooses his yoke-fellow for life, in all the blind haste, the crude taste of his earlier years, when taste in all things alters so utterly from youth to manhood? In what the youth thinks so wise, fair, excellent, half a score or a score years later on he sees but little beauty. I have heard young fellows in their college terms, utterly recant in June, all they swore by religiously in January, equally earnest and sincere, moreover, in their recantation and their adoration! Taste, bias, opinion, judgment, all alter as judgment widens, taste ripens, and sight grows keener from longer mixing amidst the world, and longer studying its varied views. God help, then, the man who has taken to his heart, and into his life, a wife who, fair in his eyes in all the glamour of love, all the ‘purpureal light of youth,’ is as insufficient to him in his maturer years as are the weaker thoughts, the cruder studies, the unformed judgment, the boyish revelries of his youth. The thoughts might be well in their way, the studies beneficial, the judgment generous and just, the revels harmless, but he has *outgrown them*—gone beyond them—left them far behind him; and he can no more return to them, and find them sufficient for him, than he can return to the Gradus

ad Parnassum of his first school-days. So the wife, too, may be good in her way: he may strive to be faithful to her and to cleave to her as he has sworn to do; he may seek with all his might to come to her side, to bring back the old feeling, to join the broken chain, to find her all he needs and all he used to think her; he may strive with all his might to do this, but it is Sisyphus-labour; the scales have fallen from his eyes, he loves her no longer! It is not his fault; she belongs to the things of his youth which pleased a crude taste, an immature judgment; he sees her now *as she is*, and she is far below him, far behind him; if he progress he goes on alone, if he fall back to her level, his mind deteriorates with every day that dawns! Would he bring to the Commons no arguments riper than the crude debates that were his glory at the Union; would he condemn himself in science never to discard the unsound theories that were the delight of his early speculations; would he deny himself the right to fling aside the moonshine philosophies, the cobweb metaphysics that he wove in his youth, and forbid himself title to advance beyond them? Surely not! Yet he would chain himself through his lifelong to a yoke-fellow as unfit and insufficient to his older years, as ever the theories and thoughts

of his youth can be; as fatal to his peace while he is bound to her, as they would be fatal to the mind they dwarfed, to the brain they crammed into a prison-cell!

In youth Rosaline seems very fair,

‘None else being by

Herself poised with herself in either eye.’

A young man meets a young girl in society, or at the sea-side, or on the deck of a Rhine steamer; she has nice fresh colouring, bright blue eyes, or black ones, as the case may be, very nice ankles, and a charming voice. She is a pretty girl to everybody; to him, she is beautiful—divine! He thinks, over his pipe, that she is just his ideal of CEnone, if he be of a poetic turn; or meditates that she’s ‘a clipper of a girl, and, by Jupiter! what a pretty foot!’ if of a material disposition. He falls in love with her, as the phrase goes; he flirts with her at water-parties, and pays her a few morning calls; he sees her trifling with a bit of fancy-work, and hears her pretty voice say a few things about the weather. A few cecillades, a few waltzes, a few tête-à-tête, and he proposes. It is a pretty dream for a few months; an easy yoke, perhaps, for a few years; then gradually the illusions drop one by one, as the leaves drop from a shaken rose, loth, yet forced to fall. He finds

her mind narrowed, bigoted, ill-stored, with no single thought in it akin to his own. What could he learn of it in those few morning calls, those few ball-room talks, when the glamour was on him, and he would have cared nothing though she could not have spelled his name? Or—he finds her a bad temper (when does temper ever show in society, and how could he see her without society's controlling eye upon her?), snarling at her servants, her dogs, the soup, the east winds; meeting him with petulant acerbity, revenging on him her milliner's neglect, her maid's stupidity, her migraine, or her torn Mechlin! Or—he finds her a heartless coquette, cheapening his honour, holding his name as carelessly as a child holds a mirror, forgetting, like the child, that a breath on it is a stain; turning a deaf ear to his remonstrance; flinging at him, with a sneer, some died-out folly—‘before *I* knew you, sir!’—that she has ferreted out; goading him to words that he knows, for his own dignity, were best unsaid, then turning to hysteria and *se posant en martyre*! Or—and this, I take it, is the worst case for both—the wife is a good wife, as many (ladies say most) wives are; he knows it, he feels it, he honours her for it, but—she is a bitter disappointment to him! He comes home worn-out

with the day's labour, but successful from it ; he sits down to a tête-à-tête dinner ; he tells her of the hard-won election, the hot-worded debate in the House, the issue of a great law case that he has brought off victorious, the compliment to his corps from the commander-in-chief, of the one thing that is the essence of his life and the end of his ambition ; she listens with a vague, amiable, absent smile, but her heart is not with him, nor her ear. ‘ Yes, dear—indeed—how very nice ! But cook has ruined that splendid haunch. Do look ! it is really burnt to a cinder ! ’ She never gives him any more than that ! She cannot help it ; her mission is emphatically to ‘ suckle fools and chronicle small-beer.’ The perpetual drop, drop, of her small worries, her puerile pleasures, is like the ceaseless dropping of water on his brain ; she is less capable of understanding him in his defeats, his victories, his struggles, than the senseless writing-paper, which, though it cannot respond to them, at least lets him score his thoughts on its blank pages, and will bear them unobliterated ! Yet this disunion in union is common enough in this world, très chers ; when a man marries early it is too generally certain.

A man early married, moreover, is *prematurely aged*. While he is yet young his wife is old ;

while he is in the fullest vigour of his manhood, she is gray, and faded, and ageing ; youth has long gone from her, while in him it is still fresh ; and while away from her he is young, by her side he feels old. Married—in youth he takes upon himself burdens that should never weigh save upon middle age ; in middle age he plays the part that should be reserved for age alone.

And, to take it in a more practical sense, scarcely the less inevitably from every point is ‘a young man married a man that’s marred.’ If to men of fortune, with every opiate of pleasure and excitement to drown the gall and fret of uncongenial or unhappy union, early marriage blots and mars life as it does, how much more bitter still to those who are poor and struggling with the burden of work, hardly done and scantily paid, upon their shoulders, is its fatal error ! A young fellow starts in life with no capital, but a good education and a profession, which, like all professions, cannot be lucrative to him till time has mellowed his reputation, and experience made him, more or less, a name in it. It brings him quite enough for his *garçon* wants ; he lives comfortably enough in his chambers or his lodgings, with no weightier daily outlay than his Cavendish and his chop ; study comes easy to him, with a

brain that has no care gnawing on it ; society is cheap, for his chums come contentedly for a pipe, and some punch, or some beer, and think none the worse of him because he does not give them turtle and Vin Mosseux. He can live for little if he like ; if he want change and travel, he can take his knapsack and a walking tour ; nobody is dependent on him ; if he be straitened by poverty, the strain is on him alone ; he is not tortured by the cry of those who look to him for daily bread, the world is before him, to choose at least where he will work in it ; in a word, he is *free* ! But, if he marries, his up-hill career is fettered by a clog which draws him backward every step he sets ; his profession is inadequate to meet the expenses that crowd in on him ; if he keep manfully and honestly out of debt, economy and privation eat his very life away, as, say what romancists may, they ever must ; if he live beyond his income, as too many professional men are almost driven to do in our day, there is a pressure on him like the weights they laid upon offenders in the old Newgate press-yards. He toils, he struggles, he works, as brain-workers must, feverishly and at express speed to keep in the van at all ; he is old, while by right of years he should yet be young, in the constant harassing rack and strain to ‘ keep up appearances,’

and *seem* well off while every shilling is of consequence; he writes for his bread with the bray of brawling children above his head; he goes to his office turning over and over in wretched arithmetic the sums he owes to the baker and the butcher; he smiles courteously upon his patients or his clients with the iron in his soul and county-court summonses hanging over his head. He goes back from his rounds or his office, or comes out of his study after a long day, jaded, fagged, worn out; comes, not to quiet, to peace, to solitude, with a weed and a book, to anything that would soothe the fagged nerves and ease the strain for an hour at least: but only for some miserable petty worry, some fresh small care; to hear his wife going into mortal agonies because her youngest son has the measles, or bear the leer of the servants when they say 'the tax-gatherer's called again, and, please, must he go away?'

Wise are the old words of Walter Raleigh: 'Thou bindest thyself for life, for that which will perchance never last, nor please thee one year: for the desire dieth when it is obtained, and the affection perisheth when it is satisfied!'

Corregio *literally* dying in the heat and burden of the day, of the weary weight, the torturing rack of home-cares; his family and his poverty

dragging him downward and clogging his genius as the drenching rains upon its wings clog the flight of a bird ; is but sample of the death-in-life, the age-in-youth, the self-begotten curse, the self-elected doom, that almost inevitably dog the steps of a man who has married early, be his station what it may, be his choice what it will.

‘ This Spring of Love resembleth  
The uncertain glory of an April day,  
Which shows now all the beauty of the sun,  
And by-and-by a cloud takes all away ! ’

Such *is* love, rarely anything better, scarcely ever anything more durable. Such are all early loves, invariably, inevitably. God help, then, though we may count them by the myriad, those who in, and for, that one brief ‘April day,’ which, warm and shadowless at morning, sees the frost down long before night, pay, rashly as Esau paid in the moment of eager delight, when no price was counted, and no value asked ; pay, with headstrong thoughtlessness, in madman’s haste, the one priceless birthright upon earth—Freedom !

THE END.





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